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Get it on, Bang a gong, Get it on...

Jonathan

Jonathan Evans, editor

It never ceases to amaze me how fast things move. It doesn't seem possible, and yet here we are once again: Awards time. For the past 12 months the dedicated reviewing team here at *What Hi-Fi?* have been beaver away in our brand new (or at least just a few months old now) test rooms, putting a huge variety of home entertainment equipment through our rigorous testing process.

Now is the time for us to put our heads together and decide on our very favourites from all those products. Here, then, we present our pick of the kit at every price point. Every one of the products in our **Awards 2018 (p27)** is a winner at its own particular price - and one in each category is the Product of the Year: the best of the best.

You can't go wrong with these products. Whatever your budget there's something here for you. Enjoy...

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We test every product against its peers in our brand new, bespoke reviewing facilities in London and Bath. We conduct all our tests as a team - our opinions and conclusions are always the result of collaboration.

Reference kit

Naim NDS/555 PS/Uniti Core; Clearaudio Innovation Wood; Cyrus Phono Signature/PSX-R2; Gamut D3i/D200i; ATC SCM50; Sony UBP-X700; Cambridge CXUHD; Denon AVC-X6400H; Optoma UHD40; PMC Twenty5.23 5.1; KEF R50; Sky Q

My product of the month

Samsung QE85Q900R, p6

It's obscenely expensive, but this is the first 8K television we've been able to test. And it's a sign of things to come. Stunning potential...



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CONTENTS

WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2018

**107
AWARD
WINNERS**
page 27



CD PLAYERS
Page 45



**PORTABLE
MUSIC PLAYERS**
Page 35



**MULTI-ROOM
SYSTEMS**
Page 74



TABLETS
Page 41



TURNTABLES Page 50



PROJECTORS Page 95



**WIRELESS
HEADPHONES**
Page 28



**READERS'
AWARD**
Page 97

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A serious contender ★★★★★☆
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OUR PRODUCTS OF THE YEAR



JOE COX
GLOBAL EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

"A brilliant, feature-packed speaker that's so much more than a soundbar" **SONOS BEAM** PAGE 82



KASHFIA KABIR
FEATURES EDITOR

"Distinctive looks and a gorgeous way with music make PMC's first stereo amplifier a joy to behold"

PMC COR PAGE 96



ANDY MADDEN
CONTENT EDITOR

"LG's 55in OLED is a stunning TV for the money – its picture quality can't fail to impress"

LG OLED55C8PLA PAGE 79



KETAN BHARADIA
INTERNATIONAL TECHNICAL EDITOR

"These R3s pack in much of the sonic ability of a high-end product at a fraction of the price"

KEF R3 PAGE 62



ANDREW MURPHY
STAFF WRITER

"We adored the 3050is and 3010i Cinema Pack, but are taken aback by how well they complement one another"

Q ACOUSTICS 3050i 5.1 CINEMA PACK PAGE 92



THIS MONTH WE GIVE THE DEFINITIVE WORD ON THESE PRODUCTS

AV AMPLIFIERS

Yamaha RX-A1080 _____ 20

CD PLAYERS

NAD C 538 _____ 18

HEADPHONES

Sony WH-1000XM3 _____ 16

PROJECTORS

Epson EH-TW650 _____ 11

STEREO SPEAKERS

KEF R3 _____ 12

Wharfedale D320 _____ 10

Q Acoustics 3050i _____ 14

TELEVISIONS

Samsung QE85Q900R _____ 06

Sony KD-43XF8505 _____ 19

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Page 24

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Our verdict on every product worth owning, p101

BUYER'S GUIDE

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FIRST TESTS

EXCLUSIVE, IN-DEPTH VERDICTS ON THE LATEST KIT

Samsung QE85Q900R | Television | £14,999

8K TV is finally here, so is this the time to upgrade?

FOR Native 8K is astonishing; upscales well; spot-on colours

AGAINST Native 8K is years away; lacks black depth



8K TV is finally here and Samsung is quick off the mark. But the Q900R can't quite justify that enormous price tag.

So why is Samsung pouncing now? Grabbing headlines certainly seems a big motivation, but the company also argues that the increased PPI (pixels-per-inch) combined with super-advanced, machine-based upscaling means the content you currently watch will look even better on its 8K TVs.

That's an enticing proposition, especially when blown up to a huge 85in, which is the size of the Q900R we're reviewing (it's also available in 75in and 65in versions).

At £14,999, it needs to be the best TV in the world right now, and in some ways it is. But in others it isn't, and, surprisingly, it has little to do with resolution.

There's little in the styling of the Q900R that marks it out as a revolutionary new product. It's a smart-looking telly, but it doesn't particularly distinguish itself from Samsung's 4K QLEDs.

Here, the thin bezels along the top and sides are angled outward rather than inward, as they are on the Q9FN, which means they reflect light differently and make the finish look darker, despite the material and colour being the same.

The bottom bezel is actually thicker than that of the 4K QLEDs, creating a 'lip' of about 2-3cm.

Rather than a central pedestal stand, the Q900R has two feet that can be located either end of the chassis or moved closer to the centre for placement of the TV on a smaller piece of furniture.

If you're brave enough to wall-mount the thing, the feet can be removed and stored in clever cutouts on the rear of the TV so they don't get lost. And yes, the Q900R is compatible with Samsung's own No Gap Wall Mount - giving it the look of a huge, framed painting - as well as standard (albeit large and strong) VESA mounts.

Somewhat future-proof

As is the norm for Samsung these days, the Q900R's connections are located not on the back of the set, but on a separate One Connect Box. This box is huge - about two or three times bigger than that of the 2018 QLEDs, which was around twice the size of the one before.

It can be hidden away, but it ran fairly hot during testing, so maybe best to make sure it's got some ventilation.

Its connections are similar to those of the older boxes - the difference is the first of the four HDMI inputs can handle 8K video at up to 30fps. One day there may be a source that can take advantage of that.

None of the HDMI is 2.1 certified, because official certification is not yet underway. Samsung says early adopters will be able to request a free upgrade to an

KEY FEATURES



8K



HDR10, HDR10+,
HLG



QLED

HDMI 2.1-compliant One Connect Box next year, however.

But many HDMI 2.1 features are already supported, including Variable Refresh Rate (VRR) and Auto Game Mode for gaming, and dynamic metadata for HDR10+. The update will really only facilitate 8K at 60fps, rather than the current 30fps cap.

Other connections are unchanged, so you get three USBs, ethernet, optical, aerial and two satellite connections. If you want to connect headphones, however, you'll need to use Bluetooth.

The operating system also matches the rest of the current QLED range, and that means the Q900R is predictably slick in use and absolutely jam-packed with apps.

From Netflix and Amazon Video in 4K and HDR, to Rakuten and Google Play Movies & TV for pay-as-you-go blockbusters, plus the full suite of catch-up apps and even Now TV, pretty much every base is covered.

In terms of sheer display tech, you get not only the 8K resolution of 7680 x 4320, but also a record-high peak brightness figure of 4000nits from the 85in and 75in versions (the 65in version taps out at 3000nits). The Q9FN, the previous brightest we'd tested, is rated at 2000nits.

But what's the point of 8K TV? It's all about pixel density, is the argument, much as it has been with phones. An 85in 8K set such as this has the same pixel density

Peak brightness of 4000nits makes this Q900R a record breaker



"8K TV is finally here, and Samsung is quick off the mark. But the Q900R can't quite justify that enormous price tag"

(104ppi) as a 43in 4K model. That's a fairly compelling case for big-screen buyers.

A mind of its own

Native 8K content does look utterly fabulous, as you might imagine.

Predictably, it's all about sharpness and detail. The image is unbelievably lifelike, and draws you in to an extent that 4K simply cannot. Naturally, it's helped by the sheer scale of the 85in display - this is cinematic and then some.

And the image doesn't become soft or fuzzy as you get closer. You could sit a foot away and still be dazzled by its sharpness.

With no 'proper' 8K content currently available, this part of our review is based entirely on footage supplied by Samsung. It is, however, an amazing, immersive glimpse at what 8K may offer.

After that is where Samsung's AI-based upscaler comes in. It uses machine learning to analyse millions of images in low and high resolution, comparing the two versions to identify the differences so they can be added on the fly when a

low-resolution signal is fed into the TV. Essentially, it means non-8K content should actually look better on a Q900R than it does on a non-8K set.

All of the learning is done by Samsung's servers and 'taught' to the TVs in people's homes during regular software updates. That means a Q900R that you buy now should only get better at upscaling in the months to come.

The upscaling is miraculous when you consider how much of the on-screen picture is being 'made up' by the TV. But whether it provides a better upscaled image than a 4K set is a trickier question.

Gloriously vibrant

One of the problems is a paucity of reference TVs at this size. Samsung was kind enough to supply an 82in NU8000 and 75in Q9FN for comparison, but they're both relatively unknown quantities to us.

Samsung's insistence that we use the NU8000 as a reference for resolution and not the Q9FN rang hollow, too. It's far lower down the range than the Q9FN, so

Samsung's No Gap Wall Mount makes the Q900R look like a big painting



there's much more at play, picture quality-wise, than just resolution.

Using Samsung's own pixel density argument, this 85in Q900R should be capable of sharper images than even a smaller, 75in Q9FN. It performs well across all content, but it's not a significant step forward, and in some ways it's a step back.

With *Guardians Of The Galaxy Vol.2*, the Q900R is noticeably brighter but not overly so. The sunset over 1980s Missouri has more impact, as do reflections from the metal plates on the Sovereign planet, but it's an incremental improvement rather than an overly dazzling trick.

Colours are better on the Q900R. The Q9FN is gloriously rich and vibrant, but not what you'd call neutral. The former can look a little pale next to the lushness of its 4K rival, but there's no doubt that it's more authentic.

But don't think the Q900R isn't vibrant in its own right. There's punch to the vivid colours of Ego's home world, ostentatious lustre to the Sovereign queen's throne room, and lushness to the dense

The feet can be moved toward the centre of the TV to fit smaller stands



foliage on the planet of Berhert - not to mention increased detail and sharpness.

Not only is this 8K TV upscaling the image without softening it, it's doing so without introducing anything in the way of obvious artefacts, shimmer or noise. But it isn't sharper and more detailed than the Q9FN, it's simply *as* sharp. That bodes well for the 75in and 65in versions of the Q900R, though. Logically, these should be a step-up over the same sizes of Q9FN.

Greater dark detail

There are some specific images or objects that prove a challenge too far for the upscaler. In the opening scene of *Guardians*, when Ego looks at Meredith in the car, the tilt of his head means the 'crossbar' of his sunglasses is at a tricky, diagonal angle, and there are clear steps along this line that aren't evident on its best 4K sets.

The Q900R also doesn't produce blacks as deep as those of the Q9FN. Samsung says that's intentional: the black level has been raised slightly in response to suggestions from some that the Q9FN loses some dark detail to its depth. But it's a decision we can't really get behind.

While the 8K Q900R digs up dark detail that the 4K Q9FN loses, the relative lack of black depth has an effect on overall contrast and dynamism. It means high-contrast scenes can be robbed of some of their impact.

What's more, the Q900R suffers from noticeable backlight bloom that the Q9FN

The Q900R digs up extra detail in low-lit scenes, but doesn't go as dark

doesn't. This is most noticeable in the black bars to the top and bottom of a widescreen film, but it can creep into the main image, too. Sit a little off-axis and it becomes much more pronounced. The fact that it's there at all when it's not on the Q9FN is disappointing.

As you drop down a resolution, the Q900R remains consistent, and considering the amount of upscaling going on, that in itself is quite exceptional.

Play *Logan* on 1080p Blu-ray and the image is supremely clean and stable, and again very similar to the Q9FN in terms of sharpness. Colours are actually more vibrant on the Q900R, but in a way that simply proves their authenticity.

But contrast again is an issue. As *Logan* enters his hideaway you get better brightness from the Q900R as the sunlight pours in, but the dark parts are hazy. Dark detail is a little better, but blacks aren't deep enough.

Little short of miraculous

Finally, looking to stretch the Q900R surely further than it can possibly handle, we play *Dirty Harry* on DVD. Here, the TV is generating something like 98 per cent of what you're seeing. It's insane, particularly as the image is really good.

It wasn't long ago that standard-def was more or less unwatchable on a 4K TV, so the cleanliness, sharpness and detail on the Q900R is little short of miraculous.

It is worth mentioning, though, that while the Q900R is an excellent handler of motion in 8K, and strong with 4K, it does struggle a little more with 1080p and standard-def content.

For anyone expecting great sound quality at this price, the Q900R is big, bold, clear and spacious by the standards of most sets. It's perfectly listenable, but you'd still want a dedicated sound system,

especially when investing this much in your TV's picture.

Someone had to go first with 8K, and that it's Samsung is little surprise - partly on account of its record of innovation, and partly because it's always on the hunt for new ammunition in the war against OLED.

But an 8K TV has to live or die by its performance with the content available right now. Luckily, the Q900R delivers a largely excellent performance in this regard, particularly when you consider the amount of upscaling going on. We wouldn't be at all surprised if Samsung's upscaling proves to be the benchmark.

But what the Q900R doesn't offer is a clear step up in quality when compared with the company's flagship 4K model.

The scale offered by the 85in 8K display is astonishing, but we can't help but think it isn't the sweet spot in the Q900R range. Drop down to the 75in version and the PPI goes up from 104ppi to 117ppi, and that could well be enough to squeeze out an even sharper image than a Q9FN at the same size. What's more, the 75in Q900R costs less than half of the 85in version.

Meanwhile, the 65in model takes the price down to £5000 and pixel density up to 136ppi. That could well be a serious step up from the QE65Q9FN, and that would make it the best TV you can currently buy.

WHAT HI-FI? says

Rating ★★★★★

PICTURE

★★★★★

SOUND

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

VERDICT This 85in Q900R doesn't quite justify a purchase in this pre-8K world. The 65in version might, though...

"With DVD, the TV is generating something like 98 per cent of what you're seeing. It's insane, particularly as the image is really good"

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INGÉNIERIE ACOUSTIQUE DE FRANCE

Wharfedale D320 | Stereo speakers | £199 | whf.cm/D320

"With the D320s, Wharfedale has produced a fine pair of speakers"

FOR Bold and well integrated; good level of detail

AGAINST Not the most exciting listen



Wharfedale's Diamond series has been the bedrock of its product output since introduced in the early 1980s, but the 11th generation, released last year, left a gap at entry-level price points. This is where the new D300 range comes in.

It consists of two standmount pairs, of which the D320s are the larger and more costly. Though Wharfedale is adamant this series is not a new Diamond range, there's a close relationship between the two.

Carefully engineered

This is most evident in the D320's drive units. The 25mm dome tweeter is pretty much unchanged from the Diamond 11.1 we reviewed last year, with its vented design and shaped faceplate, while the 13cm mid/bass still uses a woven Kevlar cone with its unusual foam surround.

The mid/bass is claimed to be a long throw unit and has a one-piece pole plate fitted with a copper cap to reduce

inductance and control magnetic flux. The magnet is ceramic in a bid to get a smooth response combined with high sensitivity, and the chassis is ribbed for rigidity and designed to be as open as possible to minimise reflections.

Another carry over is the unusual downward-facing port. In the Diamond range, this fires into a gap between the cabinet base and a built-in plinth, but in the case of the D320 budget constraints have meant that the speakers sit on small feet and the port fires straight onto the supporting surface.

Overall build is good for the money. These standmounters feel solid thanks to a braced cabinet and an unusually thick front baffle of 28mm. The engineers have also taken care to round off the cabinet edges to reduce diffraction effects.

On first listen there's much to admire. The D320s sound bold in a way that most similarly-sized rivals would struggle to

match. The integration between the drivers is nicely handled, resulting in a well-projected and clear midrange that delivers a good amount of detail and clarity.

Strong competition

We listen to Kate Bush's *Aerial* and the Wharfedales take the complex production in their stride. No speaker at this level will unravel every instrumental strand, but the D320s dig up a fair amount of detail and organise it in a musically rewarding way.

While delivering a good amount of punch, they don't quite have the dynamic subtlety of class leaders such as Dali's Spektr 2s, or the same rhythmic precision. The result is that we're not drawn into the music quite so much, but there's no denying the speakers' refinement or the superb tonal balance Wharfedale has engineered. These speakers are as forgiving as they come with poor recordings, but still have the balance and openness to please with better productions and systems.

We listen to a range of music, from Miles Davis's *Kind Of Blue* to Eminem's *Recovery* and the Wharfedales don't blink. They don't favour one genre over another, and have enough in the way of attack, tonal balance and smoothness to keep us listening. Their stereo imaging is decently expansive and stable enough to pinpoint the position of instruments, while bass, always limited in speakers of this size, is pleasingly weighty.

We like the D320s. They're easy to get along with and will work well in a wide range of systems. They're up against some tough competition from Q Acoustics' 3010i/3020i duo and the Dali Spektr 2s; but, even against such formidable opposition, they're still worth a listen.

KEY FEATURES



28mm front baffle



25mm dome tweeter



13cm Kevlar mid/bass driver

WHAT HI-FI? says

Rating ★★★★★

SOUND ★★★★★

FEATURES ★★★★★

BUILD ★★★★★

VERDICT The D320s are fine performers but are up against some particularly talented rivals.

"The D320s aren't part of the company's Diamond range, but they still share much of the same DNA"

View offers

Epson EH-TW650 | Projector | £450 | whf.cm/EH-TW650

"Fine sharpness, faithful colour reproduction"

FOR Crisp and clear picture; brightness; rich, realistic colours

AGAINST Slight image stability issue with SD material



Though 4K home cinema projectors no longer exclusively carry eye-watering price tags - you can pick one up for around £1000 - it will be some time before they trickle down to the £500 mark currently occupied by budget Full HD projectors such as the Epson EH-TW650.

But technological progression, such as that from Full HD to 4K, puts extra pressure on 'last-generation' kit to deliver even more for less. Which is exactly what this modest, yet accomplished, Epson does.

Budget belter

Apart from its 1080p resolution, nothing about this Epson is second-rate. For anyone looking for a display capable of up to 300 inches on a budget, the EH-TW650 is an easy projector to endorse.

Its 3100-lumen brightness and claimed 15,000:1 contrast ratio mean this projector is capable of beaming images that are bright enough to be clearly seen in a day-lit room. It displays images with reasonably good contrast, bright whites and dark blacks.

The claimed 11-year lifespan of the Epson's lamp is based on an average daily use of 1hr 45mins (in Eco mode). You can also use the built-in wi-fi to beam media from a smartphone via the iProjection app.

The only notable specification missing from the EH-TW650's spec sheet is 3D support, which its sibling, the EH-TW5650, delivers for £750.



Few projectors fulfill their brief as well as the EH-TW650

KEY FEATURES

3100

3100 lumens

15,000:1

15,000:1 contrast ratio

2 x HDMI, 1 x USB, 1 x VGA inputs

Weighing 2.7kg, the Epson's modestly sized white chassis is largely frills-free but, importantly, it feels well made and up to the task of lasting 11 years on your shelf.

Two HDMI inputs, and VGA, component and USB connections provide the means of connecting a source, and a remote control is included, making it easy to browse settings - a practicality we'd urge you to do.

Find the right Cinema

From the 'colour mode' options of Cinema, Bright Cinema and Dynamic, we prefer the former's rich-yet-realistic palette, although we imagine some will favour the punchier tones offered by Bright Cinema, which certainly suits lighter environments.

Blue Planet II is as much an advert for the world's stunning coastlines as it is for the Epson's fine sharpness and faithful colour reproduction and, via the Full HD Blu-ray, the EH-TW650 captures the splendour of the production. Seals glisten in the sea and there's lots of detail in the startling close-up frames. There's also a good level of stability in the camerawork as landscapes are panned and schools of fish darting from predators are tracked.

Those with DVD collections will benefit from the Epson's decent upscaling - it

maintains clarity, colour richness and depth to decent levels - although we notice some noise creeping into its 720 x 480 delivery.

It's acceptable for the most part but, even after playing with the settings, we still can't iron out the slight instability of the subtitles of French horror film *Raw* - which slightly hinders our enjoyment. In most cases, the minor instability won't be an issue, but it's something to be aware of.

That minor instability issue aside, this Epson is pretty faultless for its price tag. So if you're ready to make the switch from a TV screen to an entry-level projector, and want a competent bargain to play Full HD and SD material while you save up for a much pricier 4K model, the Epson EH-TW650 would make a fine choice.

WHAT HI-FI? says

Rating ★★★★★

PICTURE



FEATURES



BUILD



VERDICT Once again, Epson offers big-screen delight on a budget



View offers

KEF R3 | Stereo speakers | £1,300 | whf.cm/R3

"These KEFs are way beyond most rivals"

FOR Balanced, entertaining sound; good build and finish

AGAINST Nothing at this price



Earlier this year, we reviewed KEF's mighty Reference 1 standmounters. These speakers delivered a performance so complete that even that hefty £5000 price tag started to look entirely reasonable.

But no matter how great value it is, such a product will always be out of the reach of most people, so that's where the new R3s come in. Part of the company's recently introduced premium R series, the R3s offer a large chunk of the Reference 1's engineering content and sonic performance at a fraction of the cost.

Single drive unit

KEF's distinctive Uni-Q driver array is at the heart of these speakers. While it may look like a single drive unit, it is actually a two-way arrangement where the tweeter is positioned right in the throat of the midrange driver. This isn't easy to do properly, but such a configuration is claimed to improve dispersion and integration.

The Uni-Q array design has been continuously refined since the late 1980s and this latest generation is the 12th iteration. It uses a 25mm aluminium dome tweeter with a 12.5cm aluminium midrange unit and features a host of detail refinements to the motor assembly, suspension and drive unit structure to reduce distortion and improve performance over earlier versions.

The R3s are a three-way design, with a dedicated bass driver. Such a configuration means that each driver – tweeter, midrange and bass – can be optimised to work in its specific frequency band and tuned with less compromise than a two-way alternative would demand. The trade-off tends to be the greater cost and complicity of trying to combine three drive units to work as a cohesive whole. That's why most rival companies don't bother at this level.

The R3's bass driver uses a 16.5cm hybrid aluminium/paper cone that aims to combine rigidity with good damping

characteristics. It's a vented design to help with dynamics at high volume levels. The bass is tuned by a rear firing port, which uses the same flexible construction as KEF's successful LS50s, which the company claims reduces resonances and distortions.

The KEF's sensitivity is rated at an average 87dB and nominal impedance is claimed to be 8 ohms, though a minimum value of 3.2 ohms suggest that an amplifier with a bit of grunt would be good. We use our reference £15,000 Gamut D3i/D200i pre/power combination for much of this test – its output of 220W per channel makes the KEFs sing. Rega's £950 Elex-R (72W per channel) is something more likely to partner the R3s and does well too.

KEY FEATURES



Biwireable



8 ohms



Sensitivity 87 (db/w/m)

We like the speaker's clean appearance. But even here the decisions have been made on performance grounds. The shaped trim around the Uni-Q driver doesn't just make the front panel look balanced by echoing the size of the larger bass driver; it also helps to reduce diffraction effects at the cabinet edges. That slim front looks smart and offers advantages in rigidity and dispersion.

Brace yourself

Overall build quality is terrific. The enclosure feels immensely rigid thanks to some clever bracing techniques that combine reinforcement with damping. On the outside, these speakers look classy and are finished beautifully. All the edges are crisp and the gloss finish on our black samples is lovely. Of course, £1,300 is still a lot of money, but these speakers look worth it and more. The R3s are also available in gloss white and a more traditional walnut.

Despite being relatively slim and compact boxes – the KEFs stand just 42cm high – the R3s are capable of delivering a good amount of bass weight and authority. In our test room they sound most balanced well away from all walls.

We would suggest positioning them at least 70cm into the room as a good starting point. The Uni-Q array disperses the sound in a wide and consistent manner, so toe-in angle towards the listening position isn't as critical as it is with most conventional rivals if you want pinpoint stereo imaging. We start serious listening once everything is dialled in properly, which doesn't take long thanks to the KEF's well-balanced presentation.

We start with Debussy's *Clair De Lune* and revel in the R3s' excellent midrange clarity and ability to render the subtle dynamic nuances of the piano with delicacy. The KEFs capture the natural acoustic of the recording superbly, showing a level of insight and detail resolution way beyond most rivals.



KEF claims the rear-firing port design will reduce distortion



Even the speaker's clean appearance is designed to aid the performance

"The R3s are brilliant all-rounders, and a pair to buy with confidence"

Despite all the analysis it remains a musical performer, one that focuses the listener's attention on the message rather than the mechanics of replay.

Sonic scale

We move onto something larger scale in the form of Hans Zimmer's *Gladiator* OST. Here the KEFs show the ability to generate plenty of sonic scale and authority. The R3s sound much bigger than they are, delivering an excellent stereo soundstage that is well organised, precise and nicely focused. That stereo image remains stable and convincing even when we move away from our favoured listening position. It's here that the advantages of the Uni-Q are most clear.

Tonally, the presentation is balanced and natural. There's no emphasis of any particular frequency band to make the speakers sound more interesting or exciting. That job is down to the original recording. This even-handed nature means that the speakers sound right at home across a wide range of recordings, and refuse to favour any particular musical genre above another.

This is brought home when we listen to Eminem's classic *Marshall Mathers LP*. It's a

thin and hard recording - something the KEFs make perfectly clear - but they make the most of the hard charging rhythms, that lovely rolling bassline on *The Way I Am* and that haunting Dido vocal sample on *Stan*. The R3's midrange performance impresses again, delivering Eminem's rapid outpourings with agility and clarity. There's plenty of punch and attack when the music demands.

The R3s are brilliant all-rounders. They're expertly sonically balanced and work well across a wide range of systems, but give them a top class feed and they will deliver a sound good enough to worry most rival standmounters below the two grand mark. This is one to buy with confidence.

WHAT HI-FI? says

Rating ★★★★★

SOUND ★★★★★

FEATURES ★★★★★

BUILD ★★★★★

VERDICT Arguably the most complete standmounters at this price, these R3s are exceptional performers



Bi-wire terminals can be linked for single wired operation

Q Acoustics 3050i | Stereo speakers | £649 | whf.cm/3050i

"Clearer, cleaner and punchier than ever before"

FOR Punchy and musical; spacious presentation

AGAINST Nothing of note at this price



If your love of bass and big sound is paramount in your search for new speakers, you may find yourself looking at pair of midrange floorstanders. Few pairs offer that kind of heft while matching the best comparable standmounters in every other regard, but there are some... such as these Q Acoustics 3050is, for instance.

Regular readers of *What Hi-Fi?* won't be surprised to see five stars next to Q Acoustics' name - not only have both the 3010i and 3020i standmounters in the brand's 3000i family already bagged maximum stars, their predecessors, the 3050s, also won an Award last year.

Steadily evolving

The 3050is are more evolutionary than revolutionary, in both performance and aesthetic. For the latter, there is the addition of a fourth colour finish and a stylish chrome bezel around each driver.

But there are some advancements upon the predecessors they replace. As with the 3010i and 3020i, cabinet rigidity has been improved - P2P (point-to-point) cabinet bracing piles extra support to the parts that require stiffening to make them quieter; the baffle is thicker to support the tweeter and mid/bass driver; and traditional terminal panel cut-outs make way for embedded sockets within the cabinet.

The 3050is' 20mm soft dome tweeter has also been decoupled from the baffle via a suspension system, isolating it from vibrations from the two sandwiching 16.5cm woofers.

Unique to the 3050is in the range, however, is Q's use of HPE (Helmholtz Pressure Equalizer) technology, which was first introduced in its high-end Concept 500. Essentially, this is a tube filled with damping material inside the cabinet, which absorbs energy and reduces resonance.

Effortless concentration

The Q Acoustics 3050i's performance isn't short of energy. Echoing their predecessors' musicality as well as warmth, smoothness and scale, they are also noticeably clearer, cleaner and punchier.

We start with the wild groove of Jack White's *Corporation*. The 3050is keep it all



The 3050is can be serious, but never without a sense of fun

in check, clocking different dynamic signatures and tracking overlapping instruments in a spacious, orderly soundstage so that nothing feels like a mere footnote. It is, importantly, an interesting delivery, the 3050is' predilection apparent as we flit between genres.

Even with more ambient tracks, such as Gas's *Rausch*, these Q Acoustics have the subtlety to pick out textures and discern dynamics without combing over intricacies.

With effortless concentration, they ride the piece's undulating waves and underlying techno beats, the latter taut, punchy and punctual through the 3050is' woofer. The Q Acoustics' ability to anchor even the deepest, most foreboding notes

allows them to communicate threat and peril effectively.

Texas Midlands by Nick Cave and Warren Ellis is also a great advert for floorstanders of this calibre, allowing these Q Acoustics to extract greater detail and reach further into the low end than just about any standmount alternative.

Likewise, the tribal drum pattering in LCD Soundsystem's *How Do You Sleep?* reveals the Q Acoustics' low-end agility in all its glory.

Thankfully that talent doesn't come at the expense of the higher frequencies. With Suede's *Filmstar*, Brett Anderson's vocal lifts and lurches between the dense electric instrumental as he belts out his cynical lyrics, showcasing the 3050is' rich midrange, while there's crispness to the leading edges of the tangy guitar lines that reflect the recording's thorny production.

Plugging a gap

The 3050is are a pair of speakers you may only need to hear for a few minutes before making a decision on which finish suits your room best.

Q Acoustics has squeezed more performance into its mid-level towers than ever before, albeit at a higher price (the 3050s launched at £500). In doing so, it has comfortably helped fill an important price gap between Fyne Audio's five-star F302s (£399) and Monitor Audio's 2017 Award-winning Silver 200s (£1000).

With the 3050is, Q Acoustics has reaffirmed its position within the midrange floorstander market. We shouldn't imagine you'd be too surprised if they featured again in a few pages' time.

KEY FEATURES



Dimensions (hwd)
102 x 31 x 31cm



Weight per speaker
17.8kg

WHAT HI-FI? says

Rating ★★★★★

SOUND	★★★★★
FEATURES	★★★★★
BUILD	★★★★★

VERDICT The 3050is are full of energy and even better than their predecessors - Q Acoustics has come up with the goods.



Step up in sound Silver Series

Combining fabulous sound and elegant design, Monitor Audio's Silver Series reaches new levels of audio excellence.



monitoraudio.com



MONITOR AUDIO

View offers

Sony WH-1000XM3 | Headphones | £330 | whf.cm/WH-1000XM3

"Close to the perfect pair of noise-cancellers"

FOR Superb sound quality; best noise-cancelling; comfort

AGAINST Fiddly touch control; expose weaker recordings



It's hard to imagine now but, pre-summer 2016, Sony didn't have a premium pair of noise-cancelling headphones in its arsenal. Then out of nowhere, the WH-1000X pair appeared, challenged noise-cancelling supremo Bose, and ran off with one of our coveted Awards.

A year later, a second-generation model brought with it tweaks that solidified Sony's new-found noise-cancelling reputation. But increased competition, notably from Bowers & Wilkins, meant it didn't pick up an Award.

Lengthy gestation

But even at the time of the WH-1000XM2s' release, their successor was already in development. The lengthy gestation period of the WH-1000XM3s is the result of a move to analogue amplification, resulting in a significantly improved audio performance over their predecessors, according to Sony.

At first glance, the design of the XM3s is similar to that of the XM2s, but the differences are almost entirely positive. Our

only minor complaint is that the move from metal to plastic in the headband makes the new pair look slightly less premium than the outgoing model.

But that also contributes to an overall weight saving of 20g over last year's pair. Combined with a new, thicker, softer cushion, it feels as though there's almost no weight resting on the top of your head. With wider earpads that surround the ear, these are one of the most comfortable pairs of on-ears we've tested.

Meanwhile, the XM3s look less awkward too, thanks to the headband leaving less of a gap to your head. It's a straighter, less balloon-like appearance.

The finishes have changed slightly, too. The black pair gains copper highlights that we're rather fond of, while last year's Champagne Gold finish has been replaced by Platinum Silver with brass highlights.

The mottled texture on the earcups of last year's model has also gone, replaced by a smooth, matte surface. The right earcup features a touch-sensitive panel rather than physical buttons. Double-tap the cup for

KEY FEATURES



30 hours
battery



play/pause or to answer a call, swipe up or down to change volume, and forward or back to skip tracks.

Hold your hand over the cup to activate the 'Quick Attention' mode, which reduces your music to a whisper and lets in outside noise. It's useful if someone is talking to you, though we doubt that leaving your headphones on and cupping your hand over your ear is the universal sign for 'you have my full attention'.

This gesture also allows you to communicate with your voice assistant: Siri is available if you're connected to an iPhone, and Google Assistant and Amazon Alexa if not.

Skip a beat

The general touch controls are pretty accurate, but they do take some getting used to. That first day or two of listening you'll likely change volume a few times when you're attempting to skip tracks.

Sony has improved the quality and increased the quantity of microphones used for voice calls, so whoever you're talking to should hear you more clearly. But if you're more concerned with keeping the outside world at bay, Sony has also improved its already superb noise-cancelling. You can now set the function to be permanently on, even when not playing anything, meaning that you can use the noise-cancelling to quieten everything down for a peaceful nap.

Frequent flyers may also want to take advantage of the returning Atmospheric Pressure Optimiser, which tweaks the frequency response and microphone sensitivity of the headphones for improved performance at high altitude. Just remember to run the Optimiser again when you're back on terra firma.

Further controls and customisation options are available via the Headphones Connect app, available for Android and iOS.

The right earcup has a touch-sensitive panel instead of buttons



Wider earpads make these a comfortable pair of headphones

The options contained within aren't terribly useful, but if you want to tweak how much noise-cancelling is deployed for certain activities, or disable the auto-off feature, this is where you need to do it.

Far more useful is a quick charging battery. The XM3s go from empty to full in three hours (rather than four hours for the XM2s), while a ten minute charge gives you five hours of use (rather than 70 minutes) - stats no doubt helped by the move from Micro USB to USB-C. Overall battery life remains unchanged at 30 hours.

But the big deal here is the move to analogue amplification. Sony has worked tirelessly to produce a chip that combines noise-cancelling, a DAC and an analogue amplifier in a form small and light enough for a pair of headphones. With the QN1 chip contained in the WH-1000XM3s, it has managed the feat.

Dull moments

All that effort has paid off, because the WH-1000XM3 headphones offer a clear sonic upgrade over the preceding pair, to the extent that the M2s sound closed-in and almost dull by comparison.

This is an open, spacious sound that gives every instrument, effect and vocal room to breathe. There has been no loss in terms of directness, either - vocals are still focused and direct, but the instruments are delivered in a way that makes it feel as if you're in the room with the band.

Combine that spaciousness with greater detail and enhanced dynamic subtlety and raw, delicate recordings such as *The Road* by Nick Cave and Warren Ellis are fabulously emotive and engaging, the varying pressure of the piano key presses clearly, mournfully delivered, and a real sense of sorrow conveyed as the strings gradually build to the track's peak.

Tonally, there's a generous extra helping of lovely, deep bass, which helps the

"These Sonys block out more outside noise than any rival, and replace it with some of the best audio quality available this price"

The WH-1000XM3s offer a clear sonic upgrade over their predecessors

ALSO CONSIDER

Bose QuietComfort 35 II
★★★★★
£330
Impressive noise-cancelling headphones that are great on-the-go

WH-1000XM3s produce a satisfying rendition of SBTRKT's throbbing *Trials Of The Past*. But this extra bass never threatens to unbalance the presentation - instead it simply reinforces the overall delivery, adding weight and richness in a pleasant, natural and, dare we say it, analogue way.

Essentially, there's nothing to complain about here. The clarity and detail offered means that a recording's sonic flaws can become exposed, but that's hardly the Sonys' fault. The generally crisp, sparkly treble is ample compensation.

Sony has improved its noise-cancelling tech - which was already superior to the majority of its rivals - right across the frequency range, but claims the biggest gains are in the mid-to-high area. The M3s are markedly better at blocking out the general hubbub of a busy office, which is one of the trickiest feats to pull off.

Constant, consistent sounds, such as a plane's engine, are the bread and butter of a pair of noise-cancellers, and the M3s are an improvement here, too. In short, these Sonys block out more of the outside world than any rival, and replace that noise with

some of the best audio quality currently available at this price.

Add all the ingredients together - the comfort, improved noise-cancelling and serious audio ability - and you have as close to the perfect pair of noise-cancelling headphones as it's currently possible to find.

There are rivals out there that can beat them in specific areas, but none offer the same exceptional all-roundedness. Taken as a whole the WH-1000XM3s are simply sensational - the perfect long-haul travel companion, office upgrade or daily commute enhancement.

WHAT HI-FI? says

Rating ★★★★★

SOUND	★★★★★
COMFORT	★★★★★
BUILD	★★★★★

VERDICT Jack of all trades and master of all - the Sony WH-1000XM3 headphones are the complete all-round package

View offers

NAD C 538 | CD player | £249 | whf.cm/C538

"A CD player worthy of serious consideration"

FOR Balanced, informative, organised sound; easy to use

AGAINST Sound lacks a bit of sparkle and sonic authority



The arrival of a new CD player is no longer a regular occurrence at *What Hi-Fi?* towers. What was once a torrent of shiny new disc spinners has now slowed to a sporadic trickle, thanks firstly to download sites and then the subsequent rise of streaming services. The revival of interest in vinyl hasn't helped either.

NAD is no stranger to making CD players. The company's history is littered with five-star products and Award winners, and this new one goes into a sparse sector where the shadow of Marantz's pricier, but truly excellent, CD6006 UK Edition looms large. The launch price for the Marantz was £450, well above the NAD's retail, but it's now a closer rival having dropped to £340.

A familiar sight

There's no mistaking a NAD CD player for anything else. The company seems to have followed the same style notes for decades, and the C 538 bears many similarities to its forebears. Still, we can't grumble when the result is as clean and easy to use as this.

The front panel boasts just the basic transport controls and the display is clear enough to be useful from a distance. Round the back, there's the standard stereo RCA analogue outputs augmented by coax and optical digital connections – the latter are essential if you want to use this player only as a transport.



NAD retains its sophisticated look, matched by a solid performance

Build is pretty much par for the course at this level, with a neat finish but relatively insubstantial-feeling casework. The transport mechanism works well though, going about its business quietly and with minimum fuss. The designers have taken care with the power supply arrangement and circuit board layout in a bid to optimise performance and reduce distortion.

As with any CD player, there's little to do as far as set-up is concerned. The NAD just needs a level, low resonance support to sound its best. As for system matching, NAD's own D3020 v2 or Marantz's PM6006 UK Edition amplifier will work well.

Agile and precise

Once properly warmed, the C 538 is a solid performer. It doesn't set new standards, but does deliver enough in the way of detail and clarity to keep most people happy.

We start with Jay Z's *4.44* set and the NAD copes well with the at times dense production. There's a good deal of insight and all that information is organised in a confident manner. This is an agile performer, rendering notes' leading edges cleanly and with precision. There could be more in the way of rhythmic drive and outright punch, but the C 538 still offers enough in each respect to keep us listening.

We move onto Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* and are impressed by the NAD's even tonal delivery. No instrument dominates proceedings, and the player refuses to become aggressive when the piece becomes more demanding. Dynamic expression and punch are good for the price, with the NAD able to deliver a good dose of excitement.

"The stream of new CD players may have dried to a trickle, but NAD's new budget disc spinner turns out to be solid value"

KEY FEATURES



MP3/WMA compatible



Wolfson
24-bit/192kHz DAC



Optical
digital output

The C 538's stereo imaging is convincing too. It doesn't quite create the sense of space, or deliver the overall sonic authority of its Marantz rival, but its soundstage remains stable throughout and instruments are located with a good amount of stability.

The NAD isn't fazed by the variety of musical genres we feed it. It's enough of an all-rounder to please with concertos and modern rap alike, having a good balance of refinement, subtlety and attack.

A worthy contender

In the C 538, NAD has produced a likeable and solid performer. It doesn't quite do enough to worry the class leader, but, if your absolute budget limit is £250, this player is certainly worth considering.

WHAT HI-FI? says

Rating ★★★★★

SOUND ★★★★★

FEATURES ★★★★★

BUILD ★★★★★

VERDICT The NAD C 538 is a solid performer that's worthy of serious consideration at this price.

View offers

Sony KD-43XF8505 | 4K television | £699 | whf.cm/KD-43XF8505

Iffy shades of grey

FOR Lovely, vibrant but natural colours; detail; SD upscaling | **AGAINST** Struggles to produce anything approaching black | ★★☆☆☆

As manufacturers continue to push punters into super-sizing their lounge TVs, smaller models have been somewhat neglected. We're not even talking about genuinely small TVs here. Depending on the manufacturer, getting flagship tech and features means buying at least a 49in or 55in model - and for some people that's simply too big.

With Sony, if 43in is your limit the most advanced model you can buy is the KD-43XF8505, which boasts features from the 49in-plus XF9005 but ditches the local-dimming, direct-LED backlight in favour of LED backlighting from the edges.

This turns out to be a poor decision, because, while the XF8505 is in some ways one of the best TVs in its class, its backlight badly lets the side down.

It's a handsome set. It shares the splayed stance of the XF9005 but the arched feet make it look less awkward. It's no super-slim OLED, but at 5.8cm it's lean enough and looks neat when wall-mounted.

Connections and apps

Around the back, you'll find four HDMI inputs, two of which can handle 4K HDR signals (HDR10 and HLG are supported), three USB sockets, ethernet, aerial and satellite (but not Freesat) connections.

Google's Android TV brings with it a comprehensive selection of apps, including Netflix and Amazon Video (in 4K and HDR), Google Play Movies and TV (in 4K), Spotify, Rakuten, Plex, VLC, BBC iPlayer and My5.

Android is generally getting better with each update, but the XF8505 suffers quite badly with stutter and lag. This can be a bit irritating, with jerkiness through menus and long pauses in certain situations.

Kicking off with current test favourite *Guardians Of The Galaxy Vol.2* on 4K Blu-ray, there's a fair bit about the Sony's performance that's pleasing. For a start, colours are rather lovely. There's a richness and vibrancy that's really enticing without being overdone: whites are pure, skin tones are natural and subtle shades abound.

Detail levels are high, too, and while the image isn't quite as sharp as that of last year's Award-winning Samsung UE40MU6400,

KEY FEATURES



4K



HDR10, HLG



LED



it's nicely defined in its own right. Motion processing, though not perfect, is also a step up from most TV's this size.

It's also a bright image - much more so than its rivals at this size - and that would make it a perfect foil for an HDR movie such as this, were it not for the fact that the set is completely incapable of producing anything even approaching black to act as a contrast.

Essentially, if there's anything even a little bright on the screen, the backlight makes everything else grey. Any image that combines light and dark elements is left looking hazy - and that's a big problem for a film with so much space-based action.

Different film, same story

It's also a problem when we drop down to the 1080p Blu-ray of *Logan*; the scenes inside Wolverine's near-windowless hideaway are the wrong kind of gloomy.

We drop another level of resolution and the Sony is surprisingly impressive. The issue of black depth remains, but our *Dirty Harry* DVD and standard-def content via the Freeview tuner are otherwise sharper and more detailed than on rival sets.

The Standard mode's default settings are pretty much as good as the XF8505 gets.

We switch off the noise reduction options, but no amount of experimenting produces the blacks we are looking for without dropping brightness to unacceptable levels.

The Sony's sound, though thin, is at least clear and more spacious than average.

There's a lot to like about the KD-43XF8505 - in many ways this is a five-star set - but some problems are so big that they cost a product not one, but two stars, and that's the case with the backlighting of this Sony. We'd expect better from a TV costing £400, let alone one with a £700 price tag.

WHAT HI-FI? says

Rating ★★☆☆☆

PICTURE ★★☆☆☆

SOUND ★★☆☆☆

FEATURES ★★☆☆☆

VERDICT Flawed backlighting and a high price make this Sony a big disappointment

Yamaha RX-A1080 | AV amplifier | £1299 | whf.cm/RX-A1080

Rich pickings from a big noise in the business

FOR Huge sound; richness; plenty of detail; features

AGAINST Loses out to main rivals on timing and expression



Though we try not to make assumptions before reviewing a product, there are usually a number of safe bets when it comes to Yamaha's premium AV receivers: the build will at least match the price tag; it'll have a whopping great soundfield; and there'll be more features than in a Sunday newspaper.

And if the RX-A1080 is representative of the rest of the company's new range of Aventure products, those returns are sure to continue rolling in.

In the middle of the top end

A 7.2-channel amp, with a claimed 110W of power behind each and kitted out with an ESS Sabre ES9007S DAC, this model sits right in the middle of Yamaha's five-strong suite for 2018, which spans mid-range to the comparatively high-end.

Rarely do we encounter a premium AV receiver that's anywhere short of robust, but Yamaha has focused on making this Aventure range as rigid and well isolated as possible, including the addition of a fifth

foot in the centre of the amp's undercarriage to dampen vibrations from the power transformer and elsewhere in the unit.

On the outside of the RX-A1080, you'll find plenty of physical connections, including seven HDMI HDCP 2.2 inputs, compatible with 4K HDR and Dolby Vision content, alongside three comparably equipped HDMI outs.

The Yamaha can also accommodate a second zone, meaning the RX-A1080 can also power and control a system elsewhere in the house, as well as offering the option of bi-amping. A phono input shows the company's intention that this amp should be used for music playback as much as in a home cinema context.

Automatic customisation

The RX-A1080's arsenal of features includes Yamaha's YPAO RSC (Reflected Sound Control) technology, which measures the room and tailors speaker output from up to eight listening positions – giving an accurate gauge that requires only a touch of

fine-tuning in our test room. Meanwhile, its Surround AI feature can optimise performance during a film, depending on aspects such as the scene, dialogue and soundtrack.

We don't usually go in for technologies such as the latter – if an amp is suitably talented, its focus is probably better directed toward transparency and letting the disc do the rest – but, here, the effect is restrained and a potential bonus for many users.

The RX-A1080 is also a member of Yamaha's MusicCast family, allowing for it to become part of a multi-room system. It can connect with the company's MusicCast 20 or MusicCast 50 wireless speakers along with the MusicCast Sub 100 as part of a 5.1 system that would require only three front traditional home cinema speakers to create a full surround system.

Given the speakers that you'd probably wish to pair with an amplifier of this stature, it may not be an ideal solution as far as performance is concerned, but it does offer a versatile alternative to a full dedicated package.

Speaker simulation

A more likely use of the RX-A1080, however, is to employ Yamaha's Virtual Speaker Technology, which uses its CINEMA DSP HD3 engine to simulate 11-channel sound on a 7-channel system. These things can only go so far in their replication of a wider configuration, of course – often you're better off trying to extract the best from the speakers you have – however, this turns out to be a productive endeavour.

And as well as its range of digital and analogue inputs for music sources, Yamaha has endowed the RX-A1080 with built-in

Inputs include seven HDMI HDCP 2.2 ports and a phono in

There should be few complaints about the well featured remote



All Yamaha's traditional virtues are on show – plus a bit more besides



"Yamaha is rarely coy, and this latest Aventure amp is keen to embroil us in the action with a presentation that is both powerful and engagingly warm"

streaming services such as Spotify, Tidal, Qobuz and Deezer, as well as providing support for the amp to be controlled by Alexa Voice Control.

We've already touched on the RX-A1080's substantial soundfield, but it bears repeating. Yamaha has rarely been coy in this regard, and this latest Aventure amp is keen to embroil us in the action with a presentation that is both powerful and engagingly warm.

The RX-A1080 feeds our reference PMC

KEY FEATURES



Reflected Sound Control tech

MusicCast
YOUR HOME OF SOUND

Multi-room capability



7 x HDMI inputs

Twenty5.23 speaker package with the ingredients necessary to rumble its bass and soar in the high frequencies. It spreads its rich, full-bodied tone throughout the register, without rolling off any treble or ignoring the more abrasive sections of a film's soundtrack.

Smooth consistency

The performance is even and well rounded, offering the same character to an effect that smoothly switches across speakers, beginning behind our right shoulder and settling at the front left.

It does, however, find itself a step behind the Denon range that leads the class in this area of the market for home cinema amplifiers and receivers. It isn't that the RX-A1080 is lacking in detail, but more about its organisation, timing and dynamics. It is capable, but still some way from the best on offer.

Even Denon's AVR-X3500H, which undercuts this Yamaha by £400, is more expressive with its dialogue, offers greater punch and a more confident organisation of the impressive amount of sonic detail each has at its disposal.

The contrast is perhaps most stark when listening to music, where the RX-A1080 is less rhythmically adept and struggles to match its main competitors' levels of expression or entertainment.

Those comparative deficiencies are the difference between four stars and five, but the RX-A1080 remains a good home cinema amp for the money. Although it loses out to its rivals in some important areas, its richness, its body and the breadth of its soundfield are difficult to match.

Essentially, if you want your movies to sound huge, the Yamaha RX-A1080 should make it onto your shortlist.

WHAT HI-FI? says

Rating ★★★★★

SOUND



FEATURES



BUILD



VERDICT The RX-A1080 grabs you early with its bold, rich presentation – and has the sonic insight to keep you listening



The front flap lowers to reveal the controls and additional inputs

The new R Series. The only thing to remain the same is the name.

At KEF the quest for sonic perfection demands constant innovation. So when we sought to improve R Series we completely re-engineered it and changed everything. Discover the full story on our R Series website and find your local KEF dealer for a breathtaking demonstration.

KEF.COM/RSERIES





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**WHAT HI-FI?
AWARDS 2018**

Stereo speakers
Best floorstanding speaker under £300
Fyne Audio F302

**WHAT HI-FI?
AWARDS 2018**

Stereo speakers
Best floorstanding speaker £1000-£1500
Fyne Audio F501



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At Fyne Audio we don't build time machines - but we do make loudspeakers so detailed and natural that memories will come flooding back. Just like it did for Jack, listening to his favourite track.

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Fyne Audio products are designed and engineered in the UK.



[FYNEAUDIO.COM/TAKEMERIGHTBACK](https://fyneaudio.com/takemerightback)

WHAT HI★FI?

AWARDS 2018



AWARDS CATEGORIES

Wireless headphones	28
In-ear headphones	32
Smartphones	34
Personal music players	35
On-ear headphones	36
Streaming services	40
Tablets	41
Wireless speakers	42
Radios	44
CD players	45
Music streamers	47
Turntables	50
DACs	54
Stereo amplifiers	58
Stereo speakers	62
Music systems	70
Innovation of the year	73
Multi-room systems	74
Accessories	76
Televisions	79
Soundbars and soundbases	82
Set-top boxes	86
Blu-ray players	88
AV amplifiers	90
Speaker packages	92
Projectors	95
Temptation	96
Readers' Award	97
Outstanding contribution	97



WIRELESS HEADPHONES

Don't be tied down by cables, wireless headphones mean you can enjoy music anywhere

WHAT HI-FI?
BEST WIRELESS HEADPHONES OVER £300

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

View offers: whf.cm/BestWirelessHeadphones2018

Sony WH-1000XM3 £330

Sony's rise to the top of the premium Bluetooth and noise-cancelling headphone market has been dramatic, to say the least. Pre-summer 2016, the brand didn't even have a pair of such headphones in its arsenal.

Skip forward to 2018 and the Sony WH-1000XM3s kick their closest rivals, including the Bose QuietComfort 35s and Bowers & Wilkins PXs to the curb.

Comfort levels are high and thanks to the thick, soft cushion, it feels as though there's almost no weight resting on the top of your head. The headband fits snug against the top of your head, promoting a straight, less balloon-like appearance than some rivals. The finishes are smart too: Black with copper accents and Platinum Silver with brass highlights.

The right earcup features a smooth touch-sensitive panel rather than physical buttons. Double-tap the cup for play/pause or to answer a call, swipe up

or down to change volume, and forward or back to skip tracks.

Hold your hand over the cup to activate the 'Quick Attention' mode, which reduces your music to a whisper and lets in outside noise. It comes in handy if someone wants to talk to you.

Noise-cancelling is superb. These Sonys block out more of the outside world than any rival, and replace that noise with some of the best audio quality available at this price.

Frequent flyers may also want to take advantage of the Atmospheric Pressure Optimiser, which tweaks the frequency response and microphone sensitivity of the headphones for improved performance at high altitude. Just remember to run the Optimiser again when you're back on terra firma.

Overall battery life is an impressive 30 hours. The XM3s boast a quick charging battery and can go from empty to full in

The XM3s are a mix of comfort, noise-cancelling and audio ability

three hours, while a ten minute charge gives you five hours of use.

But the really big deal with the WH-1000XM3s is that they use analogue amplification. The result is an open, spacious sound that gives every instrument, effect and vocal room to breathe. Vocals are focused and direct, but the instruments around them are delivered in a way that makes it feel as if you're in the room with the artist.

Combine that spaciousness with greater detail and enhanced dynamic subtlety and the XM3s communicate and engage like no other at this price. There's also a generous extra helping of lovely, deep bass but it never threatens to unbalance the presentation.

No rival at this money offers the all-round combination of comfort, noise-cancelling and audio ability. The WH-1000XM3s are simply sensational and a deserved Product of the Year.

■ Beyerdynamic Byron BT £59

The Beyerdynamic Byron headphones have been the best budget in-ears around for a little while now. And it appears these talents run in the family. The Bluetooth version of the same headphones are also a bit of a bargain, and have dropped in price over the past 12 months from £90 to £60.

The Beyerdynamic Byron BT earpieces are aluminium and feel like they could take some rough treatment. There are also magnets on the back of each earbud, meaning they stick together around your neck when not in use, like a tiny little gadget scarf.

If you want a more secure fit, perhaps for running, you can attach a little in-ear hook as well as a pair of silicone tips. This is just an extra bit of rubbery scaffolding to avoid you accidentally pulling the pair out. Four pairs of tips are included, as well as a simple pouch.

Beyerdynamic hasn't piled too much of the budget into accessories.

The Byrons' battery life of 7.5 hours is impressive. You recharge them using the microUSB port on the remote housing, which is covered by a little rubber flap when not in use.

The sound of the Beyerdynamic Byron BT is a little more forward than the wired Byron. Bass is controlled, and the presence of the upper mids and highs are significantly more pronounced with increased definition.

The Beyerdynamic Byron BTs are ambitious wireless earphones, attempting to level-up the sound of the standard Byron pair with better-controlled bass and significantly increased definition. And ultimately, the fact they deliver on that promise and do so at this price makes them a Best Buy Award winner.



Magnets on the earbuds mean they stick together when not in use

WHAT HI-FI?
BEST WIRELESS IN-EAR HEADPHONES UNDER £100

■ Sony WF-1000X £145

There are wireless headphones and then there are truly wireless headphones, such as the Sony WF-1000X in-ears. These talented buds won an Award in 2017, and it's a repeat performance this year.

They've been pushed close by new, rival products such as the Bose SoundSport Free, but the Sonys remain the cheaper, more sonically gifted pair.

Even packaged in a case that doubles as a charging hub, the WF-1000Xs are compact enough to carry around. That case extends your headphones' claimed nine-hour battery life (with noise-cancelling enabled), too - clip them in, they begin to charge; take them out and they switch on automatically.

There's a button on each earpiece and it only takes a couple of attempts to master the long presses and single, double and triple clicks needed to control playback and the built-in

noise-cancelling. They even come with their own clever app which can alter some of the audio settings on the fly.

As for sound quality, the highlight is their outright musicality. Their ability to follow the rhythms of a track with a musical combination of a light-touch and surefootedness is unmatched at the money. Try and catch them off guard with some tricky timing and the Sonys rise to the challenge, matching and marrying up rhythms that would trip up lesser pairs of headphones.

The Sonys have more than enough punch and drive to assure the listener of their control and adept handling. There's a decent amount of bass weight which is counterpointed aptly by rich, smooth treble and midrange.

We were impressed by the Sonys first time around and 12 months later our admiration for them hasn't waned one bit. A proper pair of wireless wonders.



These truly wireless Sonys have a truly impressive sound

WHAT HI-FI?
BEST WIRELESS IN-EAR HEADPHONES OVER £100

■ AKG N60NC Wireless £199

If your budget can't stretch all the way to the Sony WH-1000Xs, these AKGs tick a lot of the same boxes. Bluetooth, noise-cancelling, impressive sound quality are all here. They're also arguably more compact, just as convenient and definitely cheaper.

Able to be slipped into a jacket pocket ready for a long train journey, or kept in a bag for a quick escape from the background noise, they are also more intuitive to use than a number of other Bluetooth headphones we've tested.

Flick the connection switch on the right housing to turn the headphones on, or hold it down to go into pairing mode. Below is another switch for playback - it also answers calls by pushing in. Using them is an absolute doddle.

The N60NCs sound clear and striking. Bass sounds solid, tight and textured and their widescreen delivery comes across

loud and clear with plenty of space to satisfy. They also balance this bass against midrange and treble very well.

With the noise-cancellation blocking most sounds from getting between you and your music, the amount of detail rendered by these headphones is mightily impressive. Quiet and loud moments are dynamically convincing - these are fun headphones to listen to.

If you want something smaller and more affordable than the bigger, premium over-ears on the market, the AKGs are a great alternative and well worth their second Best Buy gong in as many years.

"Quiet and loud moments are dynamically convincing - these are fun headphones to listen to"



WHAT HI-FI?

BEST WIRELESS HEADPHONES UNDER £300

BEST SONGS TO TEST YOUR CANS

Whether it's deep trembling bass or ear-piercing treble, your headphones should cope with these tracks



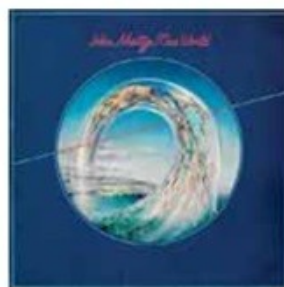
Darkside **Paper Trails**

A track with this level of moving bassline will either drive or confuse a performance, depending on the aptitude of your headphones. Darkside's *Paper Trails* has the added benefit of testing a vocal line deep into the frequency range, which will really highlight the clarity of the bass - or lack thereof.



Pharoah Sanders **You've Got to Have Freedom**

Coarseness in treble frequencies is one of the first things you notice in headphones, because it hurts your ears. This track from Pharoah Sanders finds his saxophone in full-on attack mode. Without making your ears bleed, it should sound like a mother goose being prodded with a knitting needle - you should accept nothing less.



John Martyn **Small Hours**

Space may be an odd concept for sounds being played directly into your ears, but live performances are a good test of whether headphones are able to judge spaces, such as the size of an auditorium. This track from John Martyn was recorded outside, so there is no excuse for his guitar to sound at all boxed in.



Joe Goddard **Lose Your Love**

Your headphones' performance should make you want to move with a combination of timing, low-end stability and a good grasp of dynamics. If they are doing it right, Joe Goddard's *Lose Your Love* will have you anticipating the beat dropping in, - and looking unhinged to your co-workers as soon as it does.



3000i Series

The critically acclaimed range by Q Acoustics

"Exemplary"



What Hi-Fi?
3010i

"Absolute pleasure"



What Hi-Fi?
3020i

"Even better"



What Hi-Fi?
3050i

"Expressive"



What Hi-Fi?
3010i Cinema Pack

"Power and poise"



Expert Reviews
3010i

"Great value"



Hi-Fi Choice
3050i

"Special"



Hifi World
3050i

"Audiophile gem"



Stereo Magazine
3050i

"Remarkable"



Trusted Reviews
3020i

"Masterful update"



Home Cinema Choice
3050i Cinema Pack

"Excellent"



Q Magazine
3010i

"Fantastic"



Trusted Reviews
3050i Cinema Pack



IN-EAR HEADPHONES

Take your pick of these brilliant buds and let that morning commute just drift by

View offers: whf.cm/BestInEars2018

■ Klipsch R6i II £90

This year's brand new entry in this category goes straight to the top of the pile, scooping the Product of the Year Award for good measure.

Klipsch has a rich history when it comes to delivering top-class headphones that look and sound better than they should considering their price. And the R6i II in-ears might just be the best example yet.

The R6i IIs use a dual magnet, moving-coil driver design, hidden behind some patented oval ear tips. The seal these tips provide is particularly good, fitting snugly in the ear without ever becoming uncomfortable.

Made of aluminium and elastomer, the housings are slightly curved at the back so your finger or thumb sits neatly in the space. There's a three-button playback control that looks stylish and gives good feedback when you click it.

Sonically, no matter what type of music you're playing, they deliver impressive clarity and transparency.

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

Playing *Radar Love* by Golden Earring, the guitar riffs that punctuate each line almost leave sparks as they scorch through the track. The R6i IIs' dynamism and enthusiasm, combines with an ability to go loud.

Unlike some headphones that 'round off' your music to make it more pleasant in exchange for pure fidelity, the R6i IIs take no prisoners. They're more likely to reveal flaws in your tracks or your equipment than other headphones, but with a good set-up, you'll get noticeably more out of your music.

The R6i IIs' great sense of timing and organisation puts them ahead of the

WHAT HI-FI?

BEST IN-EAR HEADPHONES £50-£100

competition, helping them deliver an organised and balanced sound.

All that is done with a sophisticated tonal balance - the treble doesn't come across as excessively sharp, nor is the bass overly deep or lax. There's no overpowered bass here, Klipsch has opted for a more accurate and enjoyable balance.

The Klipsch R6i IIs are a great pair of headphones that look and feel as though they should be far more expensive than they actually are. For a very reasonable price of just £90, they give you a five-star sound quality without an ounce of reservation.

The Klipsch R6i IIs look and feel more expensive than they are

■ Beyerdynamic Byron £49

It wasn't until last year that Beyerdynamic added the budget in-ear headphone category to its long line of previous Awards wins - but it seems the Byron earphones now have this category sewn up. The company's long-standing expertise with headphones made its mark here, and we've not found a better pair of in-ears under £50 this year.

With the Byrons, Beyerdynamic has delivered an expertly balanced sound, something many affordable earphones struggle to do, favouring a bright, eye-catching delivery. Here we get deep, solid bass notes as well as crisp and clear treble sounds, all packaged together in a smooth performance that's very easy to listen to. As a result, extended periods of listening are a pleasure.

Listening to Travis' *All I Want To Do Is Rock* the driving guitars sound powerful and detailed, while the whining vocal has the necessary rasp and emotion.

Laurent Garnier's *The Man With The Red Face* is a solid test of timing and rhythm and the Beyerdynamic Byron buds pass with flying colours sounding precise but never mechanical.

Vocals are clear, spacious and insightful without ever sounding bright, as highlighted by The Temptations' *My Girl*. Voices are conveyed with a natural, nuanced touch that leaves you hanging on to every word.

With in-ears, comfort is vitally important, of course, and the Byrons get top marks here too. The earbuds are petite - you have the choice of three sizes - and you'll barely feel them in your ears. Once in, these in-ears are comfortable to wear and do a good job of isolating outside noise.

The slim, sturdy cable doesn't feel flimsy, nor is it prone to twisting or tangling, but it still brings the benefit of a mic and three-button remote control.

WHAT HI-FI?

BEST IN-EAR HEADPHONES UNDER £50

For comfort and a balanced sound, these Byrons are worthy winners

The Beyerdynamic Byron in-ears are simply superb value for under £50. Sonically they have a great balance and a smooth presentation, coupled with a comfortable fit and the bonus of a remote and mic. Suffice to say these are worthy winners once again.

■ Shure SE425 £189

It's five years on the bounce for the Shure SE425 headphones, which is a pretty phenomenal achievement all told.

Their recipe for success is all in the detail. To say it's an immersive experience is an understatement. Get some music going and it's as if the headphones disappear, leaving simply superb sound. The level of finesse on offer is astonishing – you'll hear things you never thought were there, even on recordings you know inside out.

Play John Martyn's *Small Hours* and the ambience these Shures create is mesmerising, with each flicker of sound and individual instrument placed carefully in the soundstage.

But they don't only do delicate. The War on Drugs' *Pain* shows the SE425s are more than capable of handling tight rhythms and driving rock. There's enough going on at either end of the spectrum to grab your interest, while the balanced presentation ensures they will keep your ear.

The midrange performance is as solid as you like – and that vein of detail continues all the way down the frequency range. Vocals are nuanced and placed to the fore, yet they never conflict with other elements of the composition in the same frequency range.

Move down to the bass and there's still

"The level of finesse on offer with these Shures is astonishing"

a decent amount of thud. The sense of isolation helps with low-frequency extension too – these really do block out almost everything around you.

If you have up to £200 to spend on a pair of headphones, there's simply no point looking much further than the Shure SE425s – you won't find better value than these.



The Shures' level of detail makes for an immersive experience

WHAT HI-FI?
BEST IN-EAR HEADPHONES
£100-£200

■ AKG N40 £350

The premium earphones market is a competitive space, but if you're prepared to pay top price, the AKG N40s are the best around – taking the Award for the third year in a row.

You'd expect a £350 pair of headphones to impress upon opening the box, and the N40s don't disappoint. The packaging acts like a presentation case, displaying the contents for maximum effect.

The N40s look smart, mostly plastic, but with a shiny silver finish. As a result, they're lightweight and comfortable, with fitted over-ear hooks keeping the buds secure and creating an effective seal without any discomfort.

There's a selection of ear buds in four different sizes, plus a cleaning tool, flight adapter, compact carry case and two cables – one 'straight' option and one with a mic and three-button remote that can be used with either Android or iPhone via a switch on the back.

But when it comes to sound, you won't get the most out of these headphones with a standard smartphone. They are intended for the sort of person with a phone full of hi-res tunes and a portable DAC in their pocket.

Partnered with a suitable source, the sound quality is something special. Martyn's *Body Music* is relayed with great energy, while Roses Gabor's *Rush* shows they're equally adept with vocals. They successfully convey the emotion in Gabor's voice as well as the slinky smoothness of the track, without losing any edge to notes.

Need bass? You'll get that too, the AKGs are capable of weight without swamping the soundstage. Rhythm & Sound's brooding *No Partial* highlights this neatly, with impressive low-level dynamics alongside a clear treble.

The AKG N40s have got the lot. No wonder they're a three-time winner.



You'd expect a £350 pair of in-ears to impress – and they do

WHAT HI-FI?
BEST IN-EAR HEADPHONES
OVER £300

SMARTPHONES

This piece of kit plays movies, music and games – and if the rumours are to be believed, it can also make phone calls



WHAT HI-FI?
BEST
SMARTPHONE

PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR

View offers: whf.cm/BestSmartphones2018

Apple iPhone XS Max £1099

At *What Hi-Fi?*, a smartphone lives or dies on its effectiveness as a portable cinema and hi-fi. So, it's little wonder that when Apple claimed the iPhone XS Max had the 'biggest display ever on an iPhone' we were rather excited.

That excitement was well founded. The iPhone XS Max is the most cinematic phone ever released, and it's got some less headline-grabbing, under-the-hood improvements that make it a musical marvel, too.

The phone itself is essentially the same size as the company's existing Plus phones, but the screen is a full inch bigger, running more or less to all four edges, albeit with a notch at the top for a speaker and selfie camera.

The XS Max's screen is dazzling in other ways too. For a start, it's an OLED, with the inherent pure black depth that entails. It's also fabulously sharp, the 2688 x 1242 resolution equating to a pixel density of 458ppi – a 65in 4K TV has a pixel density of just 68ppi. The display also supports HDR10 and Dolby

Vision, and abundant content in both formats is now available via the Netflix app and Apple's iTunes Store.

We dip into the latter, rent a copy of *IT* in Dolby Vision and are blown away. This is pin-sharp, super-detailed, three-dimensional, richly yet subtly coloured, and with excellent motion control. What's more, insight in dark images is

"The iPhone XS Max is more or less flawless in terms of picture quality. It also sounds better than its siblings"

exceptional – even better than that of the existing iPhone X – and that enables you to see more of the gruesome detail in Pennywise's underground lair.

Switch to an HD movie with standard dynamic range, such as *Solo: A Star Wars Story*, and the XS Max demonstrates a slightly cooler colour balance that looks a little closer to neutral than the slightly

We were promised the biggest iPhone screen ever, and it didn't disappoint

warmer iPhone X. This results in slightly purer whites, which are also a touch brighter and more detailed.

The iPhone XS Max is more or less flawless in terms of picture quality, but it also sounds better than its siblings. The most obvious improvements are to the built-in speakers, which produce a wide, loud, clean and balanced sound by the standards of smartphone speakers.

Of course, we'd still recommend using headphones with the XS Max. There are improvements here, too. It's subtle, but connect a good pair of headphones and you'll notice improvements to clarity, dynamics and punch. Given that the X was already one of the best-sounding smartphones out there, these subtle improvements make the XS Max even more of a marvel with music.

That's not the end of the iPhone XS Max's talents – its camera is incredible and it looks gorgeous – but we judge it on how it makes your movies look and music sound. In that regard, the XS Max is head and shoulders above its rivals.

PORTABLE MUSIC PLAYERS

If you're serious about music on the move, there's no substitute for a dedicated player

View offers: whf.cm/BestPMPs2018

■ Astell & Kern A&norma SR15 £599

A quirky design and an even quirkier name (A&K also makes a player called the A&ultima), this player has dual-DACs, 3.5mm and balanced 2.5mm headphone jacks, 64GB of storage (expandable via microSD card), and built-in Bluetooth, wi-fi and Tidal.

Many of those features were on the A&norma's predecessor, the AK70 MKII (£600), but here we have more advanced DACs and an improved interface. The SR15 can also be used as a digital source when its USB type-B output is connected to an external DAC or amplifier.

Fortunately, the A&norma has as much sonic aspiration as design ambition, with a shrewdly detailed, dynamic yet lush performance that could give the AK70 MKII, let alone smartphones, an inferiority complex.

Battery life is good too, we get around nine hours playing at reasonably high volumes - both wired and via Bluetooth.

The A&norma has the performance to take home the honours in this category. Add in its wide compatibility and up-to-the minute user interface and Product of the Year status is assured.

WHAT HI-FI?

BEST PORTABLE MUSIC PLAYER £250-£750



PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

■ Cowon Plenue D £200

Affordable PMPs need to be significantly better than your phone without costing too much, and compact enough that you don't mind carrying an extra piece of music-playing kit around along with your phone. The Cowon Plenue D ticks all those boxes. It's a few centimetres shorter and a little deeper than an iPhone 8, weighs 94g and its aluminium body looks sleek and feels comfortable in the hand.

It's capable of handling files up to 24-bit/192kHz in FLAC, AIFF, ALAC, WAV, WMA and MP3 formats, and

navigating its menus - via the touchscreen - is straightforward.

Cowon claims that the Plenue D has 100 hours of battery life when playing MP3s, and 51 hours for hi-res files.

The sound is impressive. Mozart's *Sequentia: Lacrimosa* comes over with delicacy and sophistication while a 24-bit/96kHz file of Michael Jackson's *Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough* has great cohesion and a wide soundfield.

The Plenue D is affordable, easy to use and can handle a range of files and sounds better than even the best smartphones.

WHAT HI-FI?

BEST PORTABLE MUSIC PLAYER UNDER £250



■ Astell & Kern Kann £899

As Oscar Wilde once remarked, 'nothing succeeds like excess'. Astell & Kern's Kann player has certainly taken that to heart. Its larger-than-life design won't be to all tastes, but its superb sound quality makes it all worthwhile.

It's flexible too - there are line-out ports so you can use this as a music source in your home system as well as taking it out and about. The Kann also has aptX HD Bluetooth support and can hold around 1200 albums.

There's lashings of depth and detail from this player that will make you

reluctant to take off your headphones. The Kann traces the peaks and troughs of a track without ever allowing the music to feel weighted down or compressed. It also keeps each musical strand organised in a spacious presentation.

Nor is this player biased in favour of particular musical genres, as our audition list of Daft Punk, Frank Sinatra and Childish Gambino reveals.

Dynamism, great timing and an insightful performance - it's all here. When it comes to bang for your buck - even at this price - the Kann excels.

WHAT HI-FI?

BEST PORTABLE MUSIC PLAYER OVER £750



ON-EAR HEADPHONES

Get a pair of these and block the outside world while you blast your favourite tunes

WHAT HI-FI?
BEST PORTABLE ON-EAR HEADPHONES UNDER £100
PRODUCT OF THE YEAR


View offers: whf.cm/BestOnEars2018

AKG Y50 £60

Not again? The AKG Y50 headphones have now made it four years on the bounce as Award-winners and, just like last year, they are also our overall on-ear headphone Product of the Year. So next time you see a pair of these being worn on the train, we can't help feeling more than a little responsible.

There's no denying AKG's handiwork, which is so good the company prominently displays its name on the headphones' housing. But don't mistake it for misplaced confidence - these are exceptionally well made headphones.

Their aluminium ear cups - which house 40mm drivers - have a smooth, glossy feel and feature fine cosmetic detail. Despite their size, portability isn't an issue, thanks to a neat mechanism that lets them collapse inwards and fold flat for easy storage.

The stainless-steel headband is wafer-thin but durable - surviving a few yanks during our test - and ample

cushioning underneath is good enough protection for your head. The leather earpads sit firmly on the ears - physically blocking out external noise, though they do become a little heated after an hour or so. Still, they should keep cool enough for a train journey.

The design might not be typical of AKG headphones, but their sound

"The AKG Y50s might not look the most sophisticated, but they shouldn't be underestimated"

certainly is. The Y50s don't fall into the self-destructive trap of style over substance, sounding as cheery as they look with Pharrell Williams' *Happy*.

Revelling in the song's cheerful beat and quick tempo, top timing and rhythmic, punchy expression are their

No mistaking the AKG name - nor the confidence in its headphones

forte. These Y50s have an open and spacious soundstage, and they fill it well.

Balanced and insightful, there's equilibrium between the song's clap beats, chirpy vocals and ever-present cymbals - though, if anything, bass throbs a little over-enthusiastically with the drumbeat. A huge amount of detail is revealed, the cymbals clearly present even when they're just a whisper among the rest of the dense track's noise.

The Y50s convey the immense scale and power behind the orchestration in *Mombassa* on the *Inception* soundtrack. Dynamically sound, the Y50s effortlessly wind down during the more delicate moments too.

Going strong for so long is no easy feat, but that's what makes the AKG Y50s a potent pair of headphones. They might not look like the most sophisticated pair of cans, but looks can be deceiving, and they shouldn't be underestimated. We haven't heard any better in a long while.

■ Sennheiser Momentum 2.0 Over-Ear £150

Another repeat winner, the Sennheiser Momentum range is already a modern classic. A great design, comfortable fit and full-bodied sound made them winners from the off, and they're back here again for another year at the *What Hi-Fi?* Awards top table.

But for this sort of price, it's going to be very difficult to beat the level of detail on show here in the Momentum 2.0s, or find a sound that's as well balanced and easy to listen to.

We play The Temper Trap's *Sweet Disposition* and the rolling guitar plucks show clarity and nuance. Drum kicks and vocals have definition, as each element knits seamlessly together.

Switch to Drake's *Started From The Bottom*, and the Sennheisers have no trouble serving up weighty bass. These Momentum 2.0 headphones do a great job of communicating the different tones to the tune's bassline.

Classical music is welcomed with open arms too. There's a beautiful ebb and flow to Verdi's *La Traviata, Act 1*. Strings rise and fall dramatically and dynamically as the Momentums show their flexibility and fluidity. Timing is spot on and there's a great balance of energy and finesse that keeps you listening.

"For this sort of price, it's difficult to beat the level of detail on show here"

It's quite revealing that when we were testing these Sennheiser portable on-ears, 'nothing of note' was the only thing we wrote down in the 'Against' column. They remain the best around in this category.



The Momentum 2.0s are well-balanced and easy to listen to

WHAT HI-FI?

BEST PORTABLE ON-EAR HEADPHONES OVER £100

■ Grado SR80e £99

There are a few things you need to know if you're considering buying Grado headphones: they look a bit funny, they sound great, they're a little anti-social when it comes to leaking sound. If you can get along with all of those factors, you're in for a treat.

That open-back design is key to their performance. They'll leak sound like a sieve and provide almost no isolation, but we have real affection for the design. The Grados look retro, and not in a superficial way designed simply to look good on a shelf.

And we're certainly not going to complain when the cans sound as good as they do. Their dynamics, detail and clarity are all-but unmatched at this price. The open-backed design helps make these headphones sound fast and nimble. Bass is clean and punchy and there's no sense of one frequency band bleeding into or encroaching upon another.

As there's no fat to the sound, nothing to clog up the separation between parts of an arrangement, the SR80es can jump between genres without any obvious flaws. That's partly because there aren't any true clunkers to point out. They're vital and energetic, and get their results

"An open-backed design helps make the SR80s sound fast and nimble"

without employing a boost in any particular frequency range.

Their presentation is upfront, music starting close to your ears, but the open, well-separated sound doesn't cling to your eardrums in the way it might with lesser headphones. If you like the style and don't mind the fact they leak sound, there's nothing better at this price.



The Grado SR80s are upfront and energetic, but very leaky indeed

WHAT HI-FI?

BEST HOME ON-EAR HEADPHONES UNDER £100

Coming soon



Hi-Res
AUDIO

FA7

The FA7 is the world's first quad balanced armature driver earphones that applied the 3D printing technology into mass production. It will hit the market soon!

- Titanium
- Red
- Black



Hi-Res
AUDIO

VGP
2018
SUMMER

VGP
2018
SUMMER

HEADPHONE
AWARD
2017-2018

F9 Series (F9 / F9 SE / F9 PRO)

The F9 Series offer the customers three options- F9 / F9 SE / F9 PRO which all utilize the hybrid design in which each channel is composed of one dynamic and two balanced armature (BA) drivers, so as to achieve triple helpings of rich sound.

FiiO

In-Ear Monitors

Discover more: www.fiiio.com



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Hi-Res
AUDIO

FH5

The FH5 employs a hybrid driver design that combines the best of balanced armatures (Knowles ED30262 and Knowles 31082) and dynamic driver (10mm polymer nanocomposite) for an absolutely addicting sound.

- Black
- Blue
- Green
- Red



Hi-Res
AUDIO

VGP
2018
SUMMER

受賞

FH1

The FH1 adopts hybrid dynamic-balanced armature design with highly-acclaimed Knowles 33518 driver and utilizes the standard MMCX connector for its interchangeable cables, and comes standard with both 2.5mm balanced and 3.5mm single-ended cables.

View offers: whf.cm/BestOnEars2018

■ Grado SR325e £299

Not content with doing the double last year, Grado has sealed another one in 2018 for good measure. It's more of the same where the SR325es are concerned, delivering a similar style and sonic characteristics as their more affordable sibling, but upping the audio ante.

Clear and weighty, these headphones are as musical as they come. Play some upbeat rock and pop and the Grados burst into life, lapping up any song's rhythmic energy. The delivery is organised and cohesive without ever sounding stale.

John Williams's *Somewhere In My Memory* (Home Alone's signature score) is a delicate composition - a flurry of sprightly, dainty instrumentals - and the Grados treat it with a suitably light hand. Agile and fluent, they breeze through the varied orchestration without a hitch.

Seasonal bells and chimes never sound bright or hard-edged, just beautifully sharp and well-imaged.

Balanced, detailed and dynamically sound, the tuneful, mellifluous manner of the SR325es makes longer listening sessions a true delight - and with every music genre, too.

They're a sturdy pair of cans too. Giving the Grados a friendly yank does nothing but emphasise their flexibility and hardiness - and, as the earcups rotate 360 degrees, the construction

"Clear and weighty, these SR325es are as musical as they come"

remains creak-free. But they share their sound with the outside world more than necessary when sat on the bus.

Dynamic, detailed and beautifully designed, the Grados remain an unbeatable offering at this price.



WHAT HI-FI?

BEST HOME ON-EAR HEADPHONES £100-£400

Another win for Grado, these SR325es are a sturdy pair of cans

■ Beyerdynamic Amiron £475

When you're spending this sort of money, you expect no compromise. From sound quality to comfort, durability and design, everything should be faultless - and the Beyerdynamic Amiron headphones deliver just that. They're the full package.

A comfortable fit is not to be underestimated with expensive headphones aimed at extended home listening, which is why Beyerdynamic has used alcantara microfibres (a blend of polyester and polyurethane with a similar texture to suede) and microvelour to make the earcups and headband. The result? You could wear them for hours in musical bliss.

We decide to blast out a rock classic, AC/DC's *It's A Long Way To The Top (If You Wanna Rock 'N' Roll)* and the song's bagpipes are a good test of how a pair of headphones can handle treble. The Amiron takes them in all its stride, keeping a good grip on the high frequencies without any harshness.

On the softer side, the midrange vocals in Fountains of Wayne's *Action Hero* come across clearly too, giving an insightful rendition of the way that Chris Collingwood drags and emphasises the ends of his words that the other headphones just can't quite match.

At this price, Beyerdynamic's Amiron headphones provide an impressive sound across the whole frequency range.

"You could wear these Beyerdynamics for hours of musical bliss"

We like the Amirons' clear midrange vocals, their tight timing, and the impressive way that they can handle challengingly messy songs.

They aren't cheap but if you're prepared to shell-out for a premium ear experience, these won't disappoint.



WHAT HI-FI?

BEST HOME ON-EAR HEADPHONES OVER £400

For comfort and sound quality, these Amirons are the full package

STREAMING SERVICES

All that lovely music, TV and film delivered straight to your screen

WHAT HI*FI?
**BEST VIDEO
STREAMING SERVICE**

View offers: whf.cm/BestStreamingServices2018

■ Netflix £6-£10/month

Netflix goes from strength to strength – so much so that it has toppled last year's winner, Amazon Prime Video, and even muscled its way to the front of the whole streaming sector to wrestle the Product of the Year Award out of Tidal's hands.

There are several reasons for its success. First off, it continues to offer an expanding range of top-quality new and original content that's more than good enough to keep the water-cooler chit-chat flowing at workplaces across the land, much of it available in 4K, from *Better Call Saul* to *Stranger Things*. In terms of content – bespoke shows in particular – Netflix strides away from any nominal competition.

And, if you have a TV that can process it, there's some HDR content available too. It's not obvious from the search menus but if you type 'HDR' into the search field you'll find a list of HDR content (*Bloodline*, *Marco Polo*, *Daredevil* etc). It's all displayed with prodigious detail, vibrancy and stability, too, as colours pop and contrasts punch.

Other feathers in Netflix's cap include shows in Dolby Vision, Dolby Atmos and finely rendered 5.1 audio. Yes, it's more expensive than Amazon Prime Video

(last year's winner) if you go for HD (£7.99) or 4K with HDR (£9.99) streaming, but we think it's more than worth it, even if Prime often nabs new releases first.

There's good news for mobile users too. For a long while it wasn't possible to download anything from Netflix to watch offline. Since November 2016, though, content can be downloaded to your phone and tablet to watch, glitch free, at your leisure. You can't download literally everything, but there's plenty of choice and lots of the most popular content is there to stick on your device.

Great content, beautifully displayed – which you can download to your phone

Netflix is easy to use and it's compatible with the vast majority of formats. PCs, Macs, Google Chromecast, any smart TV worth its salt, Blu-ray players from all the big brands, tablets and phones are all on the menu. Aside from the TV app's rather retrograde A-Z keyboard (rather than QWERTY) search function, it's straightforward to browse and enjoy its more-hit-than-miss recommendations based on your viewing.

Easy to use, great-looking and great-sounding, Netflix is everything you want from a video-streaming service.

■ Tidal £10-£20/month

Tidal comfortably retains its crown as our music-streaming service of choice. It was the first to offer hi-res audio streaming, and now presents a million hi-res tracks covering a range of tastes (typically 24-bit/96kHz), which it calls Tidal Masters. And although Qobuz offers 24-bit/192kHz albums to those willing to pay the £24.99 monthly fee for its Studio tier, Tidal has other tricks up its sleeve.

The Masters offering barely scratches the surface of Tidal's overall catalogue of 48.5 million tracks – the most exhaustive of its rivals (Qobuz and Apple Music claim over 40 and 45 million songs respectively). It also takes the game to the likes of Spotify with its £10-per-

month Premium tier, which offers 320kbps streaming quality.

And in addition to music, Tidal also offers up thousands of Full HD videos, including music videos and interviews.

Whether you're listening to 320kbps, CD-quality or hi-res streams, Tidal sounds great. The 320kbps streams just pip their Spotify and Deezer equivalents with a slightly richer, fuller-bodied sound, and tracks streamed in lossless offer much more detail, a better sense of space and a tighter handle on timing than their 320kbps counterparts.

Accessible via its PC, Mac and mobile apps, and web player, Tidal has recently expanded into Apple and Android TV apps, and Apple CarPlay. Impressive.

WHAT HI*FI?
**BEST MUSIC
STREAMING SERVICE**


TABLETS

For sound and vision wherever you are, the tablet is the essential device. These two do it better than the rest

View offers: whf.cm/BestTablets2018

■ Apple iPad £319

As night follows day, a new Apple iPad takes our Product of the Year tablet Award. This iPad looks identical to the one that won in 2017 – and uses the exact same chassis. There's little difference in specs – dimensions, weight, placement of ports and buttons, the speakers, the camera – everything is the same. But unlike its predecessor, the new iPad supports the Apple Pencil (£89).

The new iPad's screen is almost identical to last year's, however it now supports Dolby Vision HDR content on iTunes and Netflix, which is that bit brighter, punchier and more colourful.

Colour balance remains the iPad's strongest suit, balancing punch and realism in a way that means everything is vibrant but never unnatural. From *Thor: Ragnarok* to *Planet Earth II*, it feels as though the picture you see is how it was intended, with excitement and subtlety as required. This is a sharp and detailed picture and at this price it's comfortably the best tablet for watching movies and TV shows.

While it's disappointing the four-speaker layout of the iPad Pros still hasn't made it down as far as this model, the audio from the drivers is at least crisp and clear, though predictably somewhat lacking in weight.

When partnered with a good pair of headphones, the new iPad sounds a touch better than last year, with an extra sliver of punch added to the already crisp, detailed and natural delivery. Timing is good, and dynamic shifts, both subtle and bold, are handled well. It's a natural, fairly neutral sound much like that of the company's other phones and tablets, and one that lends itself well to movies and music alike.

At the heart of the device is Apple's A10 chip, which is more powerful than the A9 in last year's model and offers a super-snappy and slick user experience. Everything is held together by iOS 12, which generally offers a clear and intuitive experience.

More of the same, only better – the Apple iPad takes another Award

WHAT HI*FI?
BEST TABLET OVER £200

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

Its new features are geared towards making the iPad experience slicker and more intuitive too.

The added Pencil compatibility isn't a huge benefit to anyone who uses an iPad for movies, music or games, but for those who occasionally do annotating, writing or drawing, it may well be worth the investment. After all, it's pleasant and accurate to use.

The improvements over the previous iPad, while subtle, make this a prodigious AV tablet – particularly for those who fancy a bit of on-the-go HDR action. Owners of the 2017 iPad needn't rush out to upgrade, but for everyone else, the 2018 iPad makes an excellent purchase. It's comfortably the best tablet available at this price.

■ Amazon Fire HD 10 £120

Amazon's Fire HD 10 is a compromise – much like last year's Amazon Fire tablet Award winner, in fact – but it's a compromise worth accommodating.

The Fire HD 10 is a big tablet (10.1in) with an impressive 1920 x 1200 resolution screen, and is largely a simple affair. There's a 2MP camera (as well as a 640 x 480 snapper on the front), a decent 10-hour battery life and Amazon's Alexa voice assistant so you can ask it to play music or tell you the time.

Whether you buy the 32GB (here) or 64GB version, memory can be expanded by 256GB. While it's great for Amazon Prime customers, the Fire HD 10 doesn't have Google apps, including Play and YouTube, onboard.

The contrasts, deep blacks and rugged skin-tones of *There Will Be Blood* (via Amazon Prime Video) are all impressive, and the Fire HD 10 demonstrates a decent facility with motion. Picture quality isn't the cleanest, but it remains reasonably composed in all but the most testing circumstances.

While you can only expect so much from the lightweight stereo speakers, sound through appropriate headphones is a much more assured affair.

It's no surprise that with a tablet this big, at an affordable price, there's a lot of plastic. But if you can deal with some of the Fire HD 10's caveats, its audio and video performance are well beyond the standard a £120 price tag suggests.

WHAT HI*FI?
BEST TABLET UNDER £200



WIRELESS SPEAKERS

Pull the plug and enjoy the freedom to listen to your music while out and about

WHAT HI*FI?
**BEST WIRELESS SPEAKER
£250-£500**
**PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR**

View offers: whf.cm/BestWirelessSpeakers2018

Audio Pro Addon C10 £300

This is another barnstormer of a wireless speaker from a company that can seemingly do no wrong just now with its hugely impressive wireless speaker range.

The Addon C10 is a scaled-up version of its smaller sibling, the C5 – a product that we also absolutely love. That familiar driver configuration, featuring the koala design that has become these speakers' distinguishing feature, is present once again. Only this time, the mid/bass has grown to 13cm from 10cm.

Coupled with a larger reflex port to the rear and an 80W digital class D amplifier, double the power of that in the Addon C5, it means the Addon C10 can reach an extra 5Hz into those bass frequencies – and with a lot more authority too.

You can feed it via wi-fi, Bluetooth 4.0 and AirPlay, as well as through its physical inputs for aux and RCA.

There's also the benefit of Spotify Connect, but we'd be more inclined to use the Audio Pro Control app, where

you'll be able to set up multi-room facilities for all the C-series products. However, it's just as intuitive for a single speaker, offering easy access to a number of major streaming services, including Spotify, Tidal and Qobuz.

The Addon C10 is not only the biggest sounding of Audio Pro's offerings, but also easily the best. The scale of the

"The Addon C10 is easily the best of Audio Pro's offerings. The scale of the sound is impressive"

sound is immediately impressive, digging down into the low frequencies with an assured combination of warmth and punch, but also affording the presentation an extra dimension in terms of layering.

The C10 is equally adept at capturing subtler, more nuanced performances.

The Addon C10 is an impressive unit with a rich and powerful sound

More gentle, piano-led pieces aren't dealt with the heavy hand sometimes to be expected from such a powerful wireless speaker. Instead it uses the extra room and warmth of that bottom end to paint broad but delicate strokes focused on dynamics and insight.

As a final string to its bow, the Addon C10 also has an exceptional sense of timing. The extra bulk in its presentation does nothing to slow its footwork, only allowing it a firmer kick. It not only keeps time wonderfully, but it also has no trouble adding impetus to the leading beats that define the rhythms.

The Addon C10 has hit the bull's-eye in the "proper" wireless speaker market. This impressive unit provides a rich, powerful performance, with an expert sense of timing and dynamics and a more spacious presentation than any other direct rival.

All of which goes to explain why it is a thoroughly deserving recipient of our Product of the Year Award.

■ Ultimate Ears Roll 2 £60

This is now the fourth year in a row that an Ultimate Ears Roll has won the Best Buy in this sub-£100 category, with two victories each for versions one and two.

Most Bluetooth speakers of this compact size and sub-£100 price tend to overemphasise the bass in order to compensate for their physical limitations, but not the Roll 2. There's a touch of maturity here. The treble has been calmed down to even out the balance, the low end is more solid, and voices are allowed to flourish.

The Roll 2 is much more conscious of the shifting dynamics in a song than its predecessor. Fiona Apple's vocals in

Every Single Night are wonderfully clear and nuanced, the speaker showing off its dynamic skill as her voice rises and drops back down to a soft, strained whisper.

Despite its lightweight design, the Roll 2 never feels flimsy. It has a reassuringly sturdy feel to it, which reinforces its rugged, durable design. Built to be used outdoors, we're never worried about damaging it. It will survive knocks and drops, and if it gets muddy, you can simply clean it with soap and water.

If you're after a compact, portable speaker that sounds great and is genuinely fun to use, we can't recommend the Roll 2 highly enough.



WHAT HI-FI?
BEST WIRELESS SPEAKER
UNDER £100

■ Audio Pro Addon C3 £250

The Audio Pro Addon C3 is basically the multi-room and wi-fi version of the Addon T3. Which means it's a mighty fine wireless speaker.

It's a neat package with attractive proportions, a carry handle and battery, but isn't lightweight enough to be carted around in a rucksack all day. It's probably more suited to placing on a patio or putting on a desktop.

The addition of wi-fi and multi-room are welcome, but Audio Pro has made a few sacrifices to accommodate them. The C3 loses the rear USB port, and in its place you'll find an ethernet socket for hardwiring it into your home network.

The level of refinement from such a small package is hugely impressive. It delivers the lead vocal from Chvrches' *Miracle* with a sweet and pure tone. At both high and low volumes, the speaker excels, and has no problem filling a decent-sized room with quality sound.

The C3 manages to sound weighty, delving deep and rendering each note with detail and texture. By multi-room speaker standards, this is a remarkably refined performance.

The Addon C3 is another superb addition to Audio Pro's arsenal of multi-room speakers – and a worthy winner of this Best Buy Award.



WHAT HI-FI?
BEST WIRELESS SPEAKER
£100-£250

■ Audio Pro Drumfire £600

Another Audio Pro product graces this Awards issue, but this one looks very different to its siblings. The Drumfire may look more like a stylish minibar than an audio product, but this is a scorchingly good wireless speaker.

The outside is clad in faux-leather with handstitched threads, and we can't imagine many hi-fi spaces in which the Drumfire would be unwelcome.

And, when it gets going, boy does it go. We play AC/DC's *Highway To Hell* and the track's iconic guitar strums break into our testing room cleanly, followed by a forceful bass that conveys an impressive amount of weight.

But the Drumfire doesn't sacrifice detail for force. There's a sense of texture to the drums, even when they're being thwacked in quick succession. Its sense of timing is top notch, and the midrange is kept clean and clear too.

The Drumfire is more than a mere wireless speaker; this is, in effect, an all-in-one system. You can connect your record player, music server, and more streaming services than any reasonable person should be subscribing to.

Of course, £600 is a lot to spend on a wireless speaker, but this hefty hunk of hi-fi is as good as we hoped. And because of that, it's a clear Award winner.



WHAT HI-FI?
BEST WIRELESS
SPEAKER OVER £500

RADIOS

Even in the age of streaming services, there still remains a place for the humble wireless

View offers: whf.cm/BestRadios2018

■ Roberts Stream 94i £170

This radio's predecessor, the Stream 93i, won a *What Hi-Fi?* Award for three years running, which should give you some idea as to the quality of the 94i.

Roberts has only made a few small changes for the 94i, including the addition of Bluetooth – the only thing we felt was missing from its predecessor. With that and a snappier new design, the Roberts radio sets the bar even higher.

It has access to FM, DAB and internet stations, so you should never be lacking for sounds – whether from your local radio or connected to the internet via the built-in wifi or ethernet port.

Other physical connections include USB and 3.5mm inputs, while the Stream 94i can also access digital music over a local area network (LAN) in MP3, WMA, FLAC, AAC, ALAC and WAV formats.

If you have a premium subscription, you can also use Spotify Connect to get the radio to play tracks directly from the site's 30 million strong database.

A line of rectangular buttons replaces the segmented ones on the Stream 93i. They're good to use and make the radio look more elegant. There's also a much nicer flexible, soft handle rather than the solid metal one on the 93i.

If you are looking to take it out and about, you'll have to pay an extra £35 to buy the battery pack necessary to make this radio portable.

While these new modifications are welcome, we're pleased to hear that Roberts has maintained the sound quality of the 93i. The 'subwoofer' at the back of the unit and the two smaller drivers on the front are unchanged.

We start by playing Dua Lipa's *New Rules* through Spotify Connect, and the attention to detail in the midrange is laudable. The Stream 94i manages to convey the lyrics' almost deliberately monotonous character without ever making it sound dull or disinterested. As she hits the high notes, there is never any sense of stress or harshness.

Change to something more complex, such as Kanye West's *Black Skinhead*, through the Bluetooth connection and this radio strikes you with a suitably aggressive rendition. The punchy drums and intimidating panting that kick the

Adding Bluetooth makes this radio a worthy successor to the Stream 93i

WHAT HI-FI?

BEST RADIO OVER £100

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR



track into action reach forward and grab you, before the Stream 94i comfortably delivers West's attitude-laden vocals.

These characteristics remain no matter what input you're using. Playing a DAB broadcast of Mozart's *Piano Concerto No. 21 In C Major*, this radio doesn't let us down. From the smooth clarinets to the energetic, rapid movements of the strings, it has a confident handling of dynamics, and a suitably iron fist in keeping instruments distinct from each other.

As a replacement for the top-notch 93i, the Stream 94i ticks all the right boxes. With Bluetooth, it's now the complete package, and that makes it the best value radio out there right now.

■ Pure Evoke H2 £89

One of these days, Pure will fail to win the budget radio Award. When that happens we imagine it will be the lead story on *News At Ten* – the company has hogged this spot for more than a decade.

The current incumbent here, notching up its second year as a winner, is the Evoke H2, successor to the previous holder, the D2. That unit suffered a little from a boomy bass, a trait corrected on the H2, which now presents tight but deep low frequencies, along with greater clarity in the midrange – crucial for radio.

A clear, full midrange is also important on airy, vocal-focused pieces, such as Joni Mitchell's *A Case Of You*, and here the Pure communicates the song's delicacy and high register with skill.

There's a real feeling of solidity about the H2, which is available in either an oak or walnut finish. Round the back is a telescopic aerial and connections including a 3.5mm auxiliary input and a mini-B USB slot for software updates. There's also a 3.5mm headphone output.

You can preset up to 20 FM or DAB radio stations, with three quickly accessible by dedicated buttons on the fascia. The radio also has a built-in clock that can be set to wake you up with a specific tone or radio station and a countdown kitchen timer.

It will clearly take something really impressive to knock Pure off its pedestal, and the Evoke H2 continues to represent the brand more than admirably.

WHAT HI-FI?

BEST RADIO UNDER £100



CD PLAYERS

Streaming may have taken over, but these players will have you rediscovering your CDs

View offers: whf.cm/BestCDplayers2018

■ Marantz CD6006 UK Edition £339

Continual, clever tweaks from Marantz have not only kept this remarkable CD player relevant, they've kept it top of the class too. And, although this UK Edition remains technically unchanged from the version that bagged our Product of the Year Award last year, a price drop of £110 assures it retains its crown.

Those familiar with the standard CD6006 – also an Award-winner in its time – may well look at this player and wonder if anything at all has changed. But that's no bad thing, as we've long praised the player's solid build and smart finish. The controls work with precision and the transport is impressively quiet. There are machines that cost hundreds more that don't feel this good to use.

The differences between the standard version and the UK Edition are on the inside. There are improvements to the digital-to-analogue circuitry's power supply and upgrades to the analogue output stage. That may not sound dramatic, but Marantz has lots of experience when it comes to making a good product better through tweaking.

It doesn't take hours of comparisons to discover that Marantz's engineers have done a terrific job. The newer player delivers a crisper, clearer and more robust sound than the highly-rated original. As with the standard version, it's worth turning off the digital output and display for serious listening. The presentation just sounds cleaner and more precise once these things are done.

We load Bruce Springsteen's *Working On A Dream* into the UK Edition's slick drawer and enjoy a full-blooded rendition of *My Lucky Day*. The Marantz punches harder than ever with this track, delivering the song's momentum with considerable skill. The wailing guitars come through with power while the Boss's vocals are rendered with all his famed energy and passion. There's plenty of detail and, more importantly, an ability to organise it into a musical and cohesive whole.

The Planets by Holst is a tougher test, but one that doesn't faze this player. It takes the wild dynamics of *Mars* in its stride, delivering a full dose of power,



At its new lower price, last year's Award-winner is more of a bargain

WHAT HI-FI?
BEST CD PLAYER
UNDER £500

scale and drive in the process. The stereo imaging is stable and precise while the player's tonality doesn't stray far from the slightly rounded balance Marantz's products have long had. This one does have a touch more brilliance at the top end, which adds more bite, but not so much that poor or aggressive recordings become wearing.

In our experience you would need to move up to the considerably more-expensive Cyrus CDi to get a proper jump in sonic performance. Is the CD6006 UK Edition a bargain? We thought so last year when it was £450, but at this price there can be no doubt.

■ Cyrus CDi £1195

After years as master of the premium end of the CD player market, Cyrus still has the sector wrapped up. This is the fifth consecutive year the CDi has made these pages – we simply haven't heard a better sounding alternative.

At the heart of this player is the way it reads the data from the disc. Cyrus spent years developing dedicated transport control software and mating it to a suitable slot-loading mechanism.

The idea behind it is to get the maximum amount of data off the CD while minimising errors. The company claims that this disc reading system has around 20 per cent fewer CD reading errors than any of the off-the-shelf alternatives. The transport is, however, a little noisy when loading a disc, though as silent as you'd hope during playback.

We play Hans Zimmer's *Supermarine* from the *Dunkirk* soundtrack and right away the CDi displays the uniform, articulate and intuitive presentation we

would expect from a premium player. Offering buckets of detail, it allows the finer flurries of percussive interjections to surface cleanly, while the more intense parts of the score soar to a dramatic climax. Each layer of the composition is precisely unpeeled, and each instrument passes through the mix with coherent flow and tact.

Despite this, the player's rhythmic talent shines through. Pace and momentum is exercised with vibrancy. We're entertained by the Cyrus' dynamic agility and neutral balance – though fast and fluid, the sound is also impressively authoritative.

Cyrus has never been about compromise, and the CDi's solid build and fuss-free, half-width design are admirable, although the basic black-on-green display looks outdated now, even if it is easy to read.

True to Cyrus fashion, upgrades can be achieved by connecting to the



The Cyrus CDi has bagged an Award for a fifth consecutive year

WHAT HI-FI?
BEST CD PLAYER
OVER £500

company's PSX-R2 external power supply (£795) for improved scale, authority and detail. But that's for the future. The standalone CDi is easily the best sounding machine at this price. Its blend of analysis, agility and rhythmic precision is spellbinding.



SPENDOR

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WHAT HI-FI?
AWARDS 2017

Stereo speakers
Best floorstanding speaker over £2000
Spendor A4

WHAT HI-FI?
AWARDS 2018

Stereo speakers
Best floorstanding speaker over £2000
Spendor A7

spendoraudio.com

STREAMERS

Whether streaming audio or video, these five superlative products will do you right

WHAT HI-FI?
**BEST MUSIC STREAMER
£1000-£1500**

**PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR**

View offers: whf.cm/BestStreamers2018

Cambridge Audio Azur 851N £1399

This time last year, we said it takes something special to win a Product of the Year Award two years on the trot. The Azur 851N has just made it three.

A step up from the CXN, which itself takes another Award here, the Azur 851N remains an astonishingly complete, high-end hi-fi streamer – particularly if you're in the market for one that can also perform the role of a pre-amp.

Punctual and decisive

While the CXN is an exceptionally muscular, full-bodied, detailed and enthusiastic performer for the money, the Azur 851N is all of that and more, delivering extra helpings of expression, dynamism and spaciousness.

The complex, collage-like construction of MIA's *Bird Flu* is more solid and coherent through the 851N than it is via the CXN (or practically any other streamer, for that matter), while Nick Cave and Warren Ellis's *The Mother* has a greater sense of delicacy, openness and natural resonance.

Switch to Rolo Tomassi's *Rituals* and rhythmic cadence and precision come to the fore; the track's polyrhythmic structure isn't lost on the shrewd Cambridge as it keeps tabs on the challenging drum beat and jagged guitars, enhancing the juxtaposition of the two without breaking cohesion. It's punctual, decisive and quick on its feet with the fluctuating tempo.

With balance on point, there's punch and depth down low and sparkling bite up top, with all-you-can-eat solidity fleshing out a clear, articulate midrange.

In Sufjan Stevens' *Jacksonville*, cascading violins, treading keyboards and lucid banjo strumming are all wonderfully textured around his exalted, tender vocals. Trumpets soar freely through the mix, and the delicate bells never need fight for attention.

Striking a balance between power and delicacy, the Cambridge ensures there's never a dull moment in Hans Zimmer's *Supermarine* (from the *Dunkirk* soundtrack). It has the punch and

The 851N has most of what you need built in, with an optional dongle for Bluetooth

dynamics to up your pulse with the relentlessly building, chugging instrumental, and drives home the intense climax while ensuring the arrangement's more pensive elements underneath are spared a thought.

Bells and whistles

At this price you expect all of the techie bells and whistles, too – and the Cambridge delivers in spades.

Three USB and twin optical and coaxial inputs join an asynchronous USB socket for your laptop, while outputs include a pair of RCAs and balanced XLRs, and single digital optical and coaxial sockets.

The Cambridge Connect app is the best way to access your networked music (up to 24bit/192kHz) and gives access to thousands of radio stations. Spotify Connect and AirPlay are present too, as is Bluetooth via a £70 dongle.

In all, the Azur 851N is a glitteringly brilliant hi-fi streamer that rivals are still finding impossible to beat.

■ Bluesound Node 2i £499

To think of the Node 2i only as a component of Bluesound's multi-room suite would be a horrible mistake. Simply, it stands on its own as the best-sounding hi-fi steamer available for less than half a grand.

Despite its identical appearance, this is a different animal altogether to its predecessor. The richness across the frequencies is retained, but the soundstage appears further opened and with even more granular detail fed in. It feels far from out of place in our reference system, which merely offers the Node 2i a canvas to display its copious talents.

A lust for life

Most striking is the improvement in this streamer's organisation, timing and dynamic expression. Bluesound has not only cleared the confusion within the previous Node's presentation, but made musicality one of its most alluring fortes.

It is in the subtleties of a composition that the Node 2i really thrives, showing its ability to pick out the varying intensities of a fingerpicked guitar, arpeggiated piano line or call-and-

answer arrangement that may provide rhythm as much as hold a melody.

There is greater life to the performance as well; the Node 2i shows not only an increased level of expression but also enthusiasm. Its considerable bass weight, while always supporting a full-bodied midrange, now also adds kick and drives forward proceedings.

Better across the board

Bonus features have been added, too, including dual-band wi-fi, Apple AirPlay 2 and two-way Bluetooth, which means you can use wireless headphones via the BluOS 3.0 app, as well as a faster processor for an all-round more seamless user experience.

The 32-bit/192kHz DAC remains, as does its long list of connections, including RCA, coaxial, optical and subwoofer outputs, with physical inputs for optical, analogue and USB-A alongside those wireless capabilities.

The Arcam rPlay remains a fine streamer for the money, but that really serves to highlight just how far Bluesound has come since its previous generation. Though the space between



Though it looks the same as its predecessor, the 2i is better in every sonic respect

WHAT HI-FI?
BEST MUSIC STREAMER
UNDER £500

them is not massive, the Node 2i betters its rival pretty much across the board.

As far as sub-£500 wireless streamers go - whether incorporated into a Bluesound multi-room system or not - you almost certainly won't achieve sound quality superior to this.

■ Cambridge CXN V2 £799

The music streamer nut is a very hard one to crack, yet Cambridge's two streamers here now have seven Awards between them: three for the 851N - again our Product of the Year - and a truly extraordinary four for this, the CXN.

True, this is version 2 of the CXN, but the changes are so slight, particularly in terms of sound quality, that we're prepared to consider it pretty much a fourth win for one product, rather than a first for a new one.

Those slight changes? Increased processing power for a better digital experience, with the headline being the addition of Google Chromecast; so it's less of a replacement than an improved prospect for future customers.

Regardless, it remains the hugely enjoyable sonic performance that really singles the CXN out. It sounds fantastic. There's an enthusiastic drive to the performance, combining subtlety, snappy timing and rich detail to deliver a sound that is wonderfully entertaining.

It's a punchy sound that has a really good grasp of rhythm and low-end

impact. We've seldom heard a Cambridge product sound so muscular. Bass lines are meaty, textured and bound along happily to the lively sense of rhythm.

Admirably balanced tone

The CXN is skilful at conveying the space between instruments, too, with Ghostpoet's atmospheric *X Marks The Spot* filling the room with easy dynamics.

The sound isn't overly smooth, but the Cambridge delivers a full-bodied performance that's hugely pleasing to listen to. The CXN certainly doesn't hold back from delivering the full impact of a song: the intensity of The Dead Weather's brooding, screeching *60 Feet Tall* is fully conveyed, while you'll be blasted with the full force of Extreme's funk-metal anthem *Rest In Peace*.

The admirably balanced tone in evidence on these samples never puts a foot out of place, either. Drums hit accurately, the bass digs deep, and the top end sparkles.

The midrange in particular sounds lovely, with voices fully fleshed out and



The addition of Chromecast is just another string to the CXN's already vastly-strung bow

WHAT HI-FI?
BEST MUSIC STREAMER
£500-£1000

packed with character. The streamer is not fussy with file type either, it sounds fluid and dynamic with high-resolution and Spotify-streamed tracks alike.

Chromecast is a neat new feature, but it's just yet another string to the CXN's already vastly-strung bow. Here you have a hi-fi streamer of rare all-round ability.

■ Moon Neo MiND £1700

Moon Neo MiND already sounds like a James Bond gadget, but translate the acronym and it arguably gets even more so: Moon intelligent Network Device. Why 'intelligent' is the only word there that doesn't deserve capitalisation is anyone's guess, but it's clear Moon likes a bit of sci-fi drama in its nomenclature.

But even if the name isn't to your liking (we're quite keen, as it happens), the MiND's sonic charms are universal.

In simple terms, the MiND doesn't sound like a typical streamer. It is almost entirely free of those telltale deficiencies in timing and dynamics, performing with a level of musicality we've heard rarely, if before at all, in this price bracket.

Space to breathe

We feed it Manchester Orchestra's *A Black Mile To The Surface*, and get the texture of Andy Hull's luscious, wavering vocal lines, set among harmonies painted with broad, bold strokes.

The MiND renders voices with full body and detail, but more importantly with such a level of expression that

songs' characters are not lost even when playing over Bluetooth or via a compressed stream.

The natural delivery of vocals catches our ear, but, as the album thickens in its instrumentation, the MiND swings open its doors to show us the amount of space available, and just how much it is able to offer each instrument without losing composure or a sense of organisation.

A genuinely human performance

Fans of Moon's signature sound will be pleased with the tuning: there's no lack of punch, no shortness of intensity, but it has that more laid-back temperament of many of its stablemates.

It's nothing really to do with timing – it does that well – but it has a generally more relaxed character, siding toward a genuinely human performance rather than the uptight and mechanical delivery of some competitors.

There are drawbacks, to be sure, including the forgettable aesthetics, lack of a display and an app that's reliable but less intuitive than the best. What's more,



WHAT HI-FI?

**BEST MUSIC STREAMER
OVER £1500**

It doesn't look particularly flashy, but the MiND is the best-sounding streamer out there

you'll need to budget for a dynamite DAC if you don't have one already.

Do those drawbacks make us fools for giving the MiND a second Award in two years? On the contrary, it's testament to its awesome audio quality that we're compelled to give it one despite them.

■ Apple TV 4K £179

After a break in 2017 (none of the contenders reached the standard we require for an Award winner), this category makes its return – and it's the introduction of 4K and HDR, along with a number of other improvements, that steers the honours to Apple TV.

Apple embracing 4K and HDR is great news, firstly because it shines a light on specs we want to see become as popular as possible, but also because it makes a whole load of 4K HDR movies streamable for the first time.

There's just 32GB storage in the standard £179 model, and 64GB in the £199 version. That might sound fairly paltry, but as the Apple TV 4K only streams movies, TV shows and music, the only storage it needs is for apps.

This is kit for those who live in Apple's technological universe. Once switched on, you're treated to a typically slick Apple experience – particularly if you have an iPhone or other iOS device, which can be used to share all of your account and wi-fi info.

The device detects if your TV supports 4K resolution and adjusts its output accordingly. It also tests for HDR support,

sending an HDR signal to the TV. If you can receive it, everything the Apple TV 4K sends to your TV from this point will be in 4K.

The menu system is nicely designed and easy to use, and the voice control is genuinely useful. Hold the mic button on the slim remote and say "show me action movies" and you are taken directly to the relevant selection in iTunes' library. Follow up with "only those in 4K" and Siri will sift the list accordingly. You can also ask Siri to clarify some dialogue that you've missed, or supply information on actors.

A growing 4K HDR library

But hands-down, the Apple TV 4K's biggest selling point is its library of 4K HDR movies, which is expanding at an impressive rate. Sky Q has a similar quantity of 4K films, with TV shows and sport added into the mix, but HDR isn't featured, and you obviously need a Sky dish and subscription.

The addition of HDR is also a big deal, as it makes movies pop from the screen. Whites are pure and bright, colours are more vibrant and vivid, and blacks



WHAT HI-FI?

**BEST VIDEO
STREAMER**

Apple has sorted many of the unit's previous flaws, and its 4K HDR library is growing

deeper and more solid. It's simply a more exciting picture. HDR upscaling is no longer a feature, but we felt it had always been a bit heavy handed anyway.

Apple has now addressed practically all of the issues that held its TV box back. This is simply the best video streamer you can currently buy.

TURNTABLES

Our favourite decks across the price spectrum – including one for making vinyl music digital

WHAT HI-FI?

**BEST TURNTABLE
£500-£1000**



**PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR**

View offers: whf.com/BestTurntables2018

■ Rega Planar 3/Elys2 £649

Rega's Planar 3/Elys 2 combination wins our Product of the Year title yet again. No rival we tested this year even came close to knocking this terrific package off top spot.

The Planar 3 in one form or another has been part of Rega's product line-up since the late 1970s. While the current version doesn't look that different from the original, every part of this deck has been carefully developed leading to regular hikes in performance.

This time the changes between the generations have been significant. It starts with the glossy plinth; it's far smarter and more rigid than before, with a pair of phenolic braces on the top and bottom surfaces that strengthen the area between the tonearm and brass main bearing. The extra rigidity in this area is most definitely a good thing.

The all-important main bearing has been redesigned to improve fit, while there are also upgrades to the subplatter, platter, motor PCB (Printed Circuit Board) and feet. Most of these aim to

improve sound, but the plinth's gloss finish and the highly-polished 'Optiwhite' edge on the 12mm glass platter add a touch of visual class to a product that has never bothered with such things in the past.

That familiar-looking Rega arm is now called the RB330 and improves on past efforts through having a new bearing housing and redesigned arm tube. Collectively these changes improve rigidity, control resonances and reduce friction. This new arm also uses higher quality cables with classier plugs.

But despite the scale of the upgrade, the Planar 3 remains a simple, well engineered deck that puts performance first. Rega will also supply it without a cartridge for £579, but we would advise spending the extra and having the company's long-running Elys 2 moving-magnet fitted. It's a good performer that (predictably) suits the deck's musical character well.

Once up and running, it doesn't take long to realise that Rega's extensive

Packing a potent blend of tradition and innovation, the '3' is way ahead of the pack

efforts have paid off: the Planar 3 sounds considerably cleaner and clearer than its talented predecessor. There's greater transparency and detail too.

Grand orchestral arrangements such as Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* showcase the Planar 3's organisational skills, every instrumental strand kept neatly in place and composure maintained regardless of the arrangement's complexity. There's a healthy dose of scale and authority too.

Impressive shift work

Tonally, things are nicely balanced and there's a convincing sense of body. Large-scale dynamic shifts are delivered with enthusiasm and subtler ones with finesse. Some of the Planar 3's rivals may have a more etched and analytical sound, but nothing we've heard at this price is as entertaining.

Rega has been developing the Planar 3 for decades and this version adds extra precision and insight into an already-musical sound. Want the best-value record player on the market? This is it.

■ Pro-Ject Primary E £150

Our favourite entry-level record player this year is Pro-Ject's excellent Primary E. It's a wonderful back-to-basics deck that does everything we would want from a product at this level.

The E is a mild development of the five-star Primary we reviewed a year or so ago. The differences between the two players are slight and essentially amount to a power supply that's mounted on the deck rather than being an outboard unit, and a colour choice limited to just black rather than having the Primary's red or white options.

Importantly, this new deck (including an Ortofon moving-magnet cartridge) costs £20 less than the original.

That's entertainment

While our sonic expectations are rightly tempered for a £150 turntable, we can't argue with the Primary E's priority: entertainment. It confidently nails the basics, from an even tonal balance to a delivery that's clear and clean and spacious enough to keep things coherent – no mean feat at this price.

Detail levels are pleasing for the money and the Pro-Ject has the skill to

organise all this information into a cohesive and musical sound.

Body and substance cling to every frequency as reliably as the belt does to the platter edge, and that's made all the more enjoyable by a spirited sense of drive and momentum. You'll have to move up to the likes of Rega's Planar 1 to do appreciably better in these respects.

The National sounds grand

We lay down The National's *Trouble Will Find Me*, and the Pro-Ject wilfully promotes the LP's warmth and sweetness, communicating the rumination in Berninger's laconic tongue as well as the contrasting sense of effort behind his bandmate's drum beats.

It's sensitive to the sullenness of the band's heart-swelling instrumentals, demonstrating levels of insight and precision that are way more than passable in the company of budget amplification and speakers.

By the time we've listened to all four sides and the needle has slipped off the last track, *Hard To Find*, we're asking ourselves what more we could want from a £150 deck. The answer is very little.



WHAT HI-FI?
BEST TURNTABLE
UNDER £200

The Primary E is a great-value, easy-to-use deck that gets its sonic priorities just right

Set-up is straightforward too. With the anti-skate weight and the 1.7g tracking force pre-set (there's a stylus pressure gauge in the box for checking the latter), all you're required to do is attach the belt to one of the two motor pulleys, depending on whether you're playing a 33.3rpm or 45rpm record.

For someone who just wants a capable and fuss-free affordable turntable, the Pro-Ject Primary E is a brilliant buy, and a worthy Award-winner.

■ Rega Planar 1 £249

The similarity between the Planar 1 story and that of its big brother, the 3, is striking. Both are long-running designs that have been carefully honed over the decades. That evolution has kept both right at the cutting edge of performance at their respective price levels.

Much like its big brother, this latest generation of Planar 1 has seen major changes, despite showing little outward sign of the progress made. Pretty much everything you see has undergone some form of modification, from the Thermoset, gloss-laminated plinth, with its on/off switch hiding beneath the front left corner, to the new RB110 tone arm with its precision bearings and automatic bias adjustment. Even the platter has a higher mass than the last version, which improves speed stability by increasing the flywheel effect.

There are also hand-me-downs from higher up the range. The Rega Carbon MM cartridge (also supplied on the pricier Planar 2 deck) is fitted as standard, and this is the first of Rega's entry-level turntables to house a 24V

synchronous AC motor with an aluminium pulley, offering low noise and, again, better speed stability.

It takes a few moments of listening to our first LP of choice, The Tallest Man On Earth's *Dark Bird Is Home*, to realise the new Planar 1 is a shoe-in for this Award. We've long admired Rega's spry presentation and it welcomes us like an old friend as Kristian Matsson waves his hand over the album's opening chords.

Impressive detail

This is not an entry-level amount of detail: the roomy-sounding acoustic guitar is complimented by the reverb in Matsson's first vocal line; the distinction in treatment of each part is clearly audible, setting the vocal apart like a bird gliding low but parallel to the ground.

Some turntable manufacturers could be said to have a tendency for playing up to 'analogue warmth', but if you can render a record as faithfully as the Planar 1 does, that warmth of its rivals begins to feel like the sonic equivalent of dousing your Christmas dinner in tomato ketchup.



WHAT HI-FI?
BEST TURNTABLE
£200-£500

Rega's moving-magnet Carbon cartridge helps the Planar 1 achieve excellence

There is energy in the Planar 1's rendering of more animated numbers and a solidity that supports the subtler ones, while often its combination of precise timing and broad dynamic reach makes its rivals' performances sound like half-hearted rehearsals.

No other record player at this price can better the 1's depth of engineering or its ability to bring records to life.

View offers: whf.cm/BestTurntables2018

■ Rega Planar 6/Ania £1469

Rega's dominance of our Awards continues with the mighty Planar 6. This is the second year it has won this category, and rightly so, as no rival has come close to bettering its combination of precision engineering and class-leading sound.

As with other members of the family this is a product that has been carefully refined over the years to keep it competitive. Once again, as with the others, it has taken a particularly big step up in performance with the latest round of upgrades.

The Planar 6's plinth comprises a lightweight foam core sandwiched between thin but rigid laminates. It's this delicate balance between lightness and sturdiness that Rega says is crucial to the turntable's sound.

The deck also uses the RB330 tonearm, also found on the Planar 3, but the '6' is afforded a stainless-steel balance weight. Other updates include a custom-machined drive pulley, a single-piece aluminium sub-platter and a smoked dust cover to match the dual-layered glass platter.

As before, the Planar 6 comes with a separate power supply unit, in this case a Neo PSU, which also allows you to change speed electronically. The deck's 24V motor is hand-tuned to match the Neo and its anti-vibration control, too.

The previous RP6 came fitted with an Exact moving-magnet cartridge – an option Rega still makes available for £1259 – but the company now offers a variant with its Ania moving-coil cartridge. As a quality moving-coil cartridge, you'll need to pair it with a high-quality phono stage for justice to be done, but that will be well worthwhile.

The Planar 6/Ania combination delivers a frankly astonishingly refined and mature sound. It doesn't go for immediacy to grab your attention, boldness isn't put to the forefront: instead its party piece is the unnerving ability to juggle balance, subtlety and timing in the most understated way.

Moreover, it seems quite effortless: the difference between having to play the music and acting merely as a conduit for what's etched into those grooves on the disc. The Planar 6/Ania does the latter



Once again, Rega stamps its authority on this category with an outstanding deck

WHAT HI-FI?
**BEST TURNTABLE
OVER £1000**

with aplomb, sonically drawing as realistic a portrait as any turntable we've heard at this price.

Don't let the visual similarities with the cheaper Planar turntables persuade you that there's not much of a sound quality jump between the decks. Take a good listen and the improvements with each price increase are clear to hear. If your budget extends this far you really must hear this record player.

■ Sony PS-HX500 £249

We first tested Sony's PS-HX500 a couple of years ago and gave it a glowing five star review. At the time it cost £450. At its current price, however, the Sony is easily the best-value turntable of its kind on the market. Not to mention one of the few we've listened to that's able to rip your records in hi-res.

Equipped with an internal analogue-to-digital converter and USB type-B output, the PS-HX500 simply hooks up to your laptop or computer's USB input and, via Sony's Mac- and Windows-friendly High Res Audio Recorder software, records the vinyl either as a WAV (up to 24-bit/192kHz) or DSD (5.6MHz) file.

The process is simple enough too: just choose your desired format, hit 'record' when the vinyl starts playing, 'stop' when it's finished and hey presto! You have a hi-res song.

On the design front, this turntable hasn't followed in the fashionable footsteps of Sony's colourful Walkmans, instead apeing the minimalist approach of rival decks around this price. The straight-edged, angle-cornered

rectangular plinth is an understated, all-black affair that leaves nothing to the designer-in-you's imagination.

Of course, there's little advantage in ripping your vinyl to hi-res – or even playing it straight off the deck – if the PS-HX500's sound quality is poor. But our Awards aren't dished out merely for innovation or technical wizardry – this deck excels in its own right.

There's no mistaking the Sony's penchant for detail, nor how articulate it is with offbeat rhythmic patterns, or when tying together multiple instrumental strands for a coherent and layered delivery. It has the dynamic dexterity to bring to our attention fairly tenuous sonic shifts as well.

Enthusiastic and sure-footed

The sprightly Sony is quick off the bench too, springing into action with a real sense of gusto and agility, putting its foot down when the piece requires, though equally capable of exposing vulnerability.

Each performance is set in a wide-open space, too, comfortably accommodating a full orchestra and helping expose the



More than just a means of ripping vinyl to digital, the Sony is a great-sounding deck

WHAT HI-FI?
**BEST USB
TURNTABLE**

detail in each line without losing that all-important cohesiveness.

It's possible to partner the likes of Rega's Planar 1 with an outboard phono stage that also digitises your vinyl. In absolute terms that would give you an even better sound, but it's not as neat a solution and will cost around £100 more.

That's why the PS-HX500 retains this Award. We simply haven't come across a better-sounding, better-value alternative.



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DACs

Does a separate digital-to-analogue converter *really* make that much difference? Oh yes

WHAT HI*FI?
**BEST DAC
£500-£1200**
**PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR**

View offers: whf.cm/BestDACs2018

Chord Qutest £1195

Chord claims that its latest and most affordable mains-powered DAC is the 'world's most advanced', and as it stands here as our DAC Product of the Year, it's hard to argue with that statement.

The Qutest's name seems a natural one for a successor to the excellent 2Qute (which won the Award at this price point in 2015, 2016 and 2017), and it justifies it. That's not wholly surprising considering it's largely based on another 2018 Award winner, the Hugo 2.

It uses the same DAC architecture, software coding and frequency-shaping filters, but ditches the headphone amplifier and rechargeable Li-on batteries that make the Hugo 2 portable.

The Qutest's sole purpose is to be the digital-to-analogue bridge between your digital source and amplifier, and is no more lacking in either features or performance than a Swiss Army knife.

The journey from the 2Qute to Qutest hasn't altered the overall sonic character, which is crisp, clean, concise - not to mention explicitly detailed. In 2015 we

complimented the 2Qute for its "almost effortlessly cohesive and musical sound", and thankfully those qualities haven't been lost in transition.

But the Qutest offers more resolution here, and its presentation is slightly bigger and more spacious too, giving musical elements greater scope to evolve without bumping into each other.

Dynamic excellence

We play Peter Broderick's *Eyes Closed And Traveling*, and there's a new dynamic facility to our system. The piano piece is an exhibition of Broderick's ability to shift from delicate to devastating within a few strikes of the keys, and the Qutest faithfully conveys the undulating dynamics, clocking the sudden surges as well as the subtler simmerings.

Notes have crisper leading edges, carry warmth and texture in abundance, and never decay prematurely - even when forthcoming notes tumble over the top.

Timing is that bit tighter too, which helps the Qutest sniff out a rhythmic

Another in the lengthening line of transformative, realistically priced DACs from Chord

structure when one comes its way, no matter what the genre. It's as happy rocking out to tumultuous tunes as it is rolling with classical compositions.

The Qutest is very Chord-like with its colour-denoting buttons, which glow white for USB Type-B (capable of accepting 32-bit/768kHz PCM/DSD512); yellow for the first BNC coaxial and red for the second (24-bit/384kHz); green for the optical (24-bit/192kHz/DSD64).

The two coaxial inputs can also be used in dual-data mode, allowing the Qutest to handle (upsampled) 768kHz files from Chord's Blu Mk2 CD transport.

Whichever input path you choose, the output is through a pair of RCAs. Chord anticipates the Qutest being paired with a wide range of pre-amplification, so has made the output stage variable - you can select 1V (red), 2V (green) or 3V (blue).

Chord continues to light up the premium market for DACs, and the Qutest is the proof. It's the product that lesser rivals look up to at this price mark - and our favourite of the year.

■ Cyrus soundKey £99

Not all DACs are born equal. The majority of them fitted to our smartphones and laptops are the cheapest and most plentiful the manufacturer could find, which doesn't bode well for you and your music collection when you stick your headphones straight into them.

So how do you significantly better your device's sound for under £100? With the device you never knew you needed: a USB DAC. More specifically, Cyrus's splendid soundKey, which returns for the 2018 issue after its first Best Buy win last year.

At one end of the soundKey there's a 3.5mm socket for plugging in headphones (or connecting to a system). At the other there's a micro-USB socket for one of two supplied cables. One is terminated with a micro-USB at both ends for use with Android devices, and another with a micro-USB/USB cable for laptop or desktop computers. Apple owners will need the Apple camera kit, which extends the chain from phone to headphones to an inelegant three cables-plus-soundKey affair.

The first striking thing about the soundKey is its 18g-heavy and 8mm-

deep form - excellent from the portability point of view. The aluminium casing (available in red, purple, black or turquoise) feels good, and the logos ('Cyrus' on one side, 'soundKey' on the other) are raised slightly to give both tactility and grip.

The second striking thing is its remarkable amount of space in its presentation. This is especially pronounced with quieter, sparser material - a Spotify stream of Lotte Kestner's *Secret Longitude* is a particularly good showcase of the Cyrus' powers of separation.

It opens the recording wide, allowing the tiny details space to reveal themselves and giving the tune a widescreen aspect other portable DACs are simply not capable of.

This winning quality is even more obvious when we up the ante to a 24-bit/96kHz file (the soundKey's file size limit) of Aretha Franklin's *I Never Loved A Man (The Way I Love You)*. The Cyrus establishes a big, well described stage for the players to inhabit. At the same time, it reveals all the character and technique of Aretha's inimitable vocal in the most natural way.

controlled, allowing you to pick out and admire every thread of the gloriously complicated arrangement. The whole track builds, becoming ever more frantic and layered, and when it suddenly ends, you feel you've just experienced something genuinely dramatic. There's little of this drama through lesser DACs.

The lows reach new highs

Even comparatively low-res streams (from Spotify, for example) get a hefty improvement in the detail, definition and dynamic departments - as strong a case for the Red as the 24-bit stuff.

The fact that the Red can work with Android (check your handset can output audio over USB) and Apple smartphones (using Apple's camera adapter) in addition to laptops and computers means this supremely compact and convenient device can be taken anywhere for an immediate musical boost.

Having the DragonFly logo light up in different colours to tell you the file format it's handling remains an elegant



It's a minor miracle that such a tiny, affordable device can make such a difference

Comparison with our previous favourite at around this price, AudioQuest's DragonFly Black, highlights the soundKey's relative shortage of outright dynamic heft, but the Cyrus makes the Black sound like a blunt instrument. It's more revealing, more open and more detailed than the AudioQuest.

Affordable, compact and high-performance - we raise our laptop's digital library to the Cyrus soundKey's second win here.

■ AudioQuest DragonFly Red £169

So, what does AudioQuest's considerably pricier USB DAC offer that the soundKey doesn't? Not much in the way of bulk for your buck, certainly. It also can't get above 24-bit/96kHz in terms of file support.

But the DragonFly Red has an advanced DAC and headphone amp, plus "bit-perfect digital volume control contained on the DAC chip itself". A voltage output of 2.1v makes driving demanding headphones easy, too. Indeed, the AudioQuest gets you not so much as a step but a leg up in performance. More than enough to justify its price tag? You bet.

There's real sonic weight to the Red's delivery. This is partly in the form of bass extension, but also in the extra body given to each and every note. There's three-dimensionality, solidity and texture here. Full-bodied and detailed, with excellent low-level dynamics, the Red is a natural, subtle and expressive listen.

It's also well organised. A 24-bit file of Radiohead's *Burn The Witch* is fully



If you didn't think superb sound and extreme portability could go together, listen to this

and instant method of delivering mind-easing information, too.

We have some reservations about the hardness of that red finish - Audioquest provides a pouch as a tacit admission of its vulnerability - but in every other respect the DragonFly Red is a pretty perfect computer (or smartphone) music upgrade - as three Awards attest.

View offers: whf.cm/BestDACs2018

■ Chord Mojo £379

Despite the unquestionable value and accessibility of the USB DACs on the previous page, nothing quite brings 'Mobile Joy' like the Chord Mojo - which stands for exactly that. It can be seen as the perfect portable DAC solution for those who crave Chord's Hugo 2 (£1799, below) but stutter at its hefty price.

It takes a while to get used to the device's control layout. Three ball-like buttons take care of power on/off and the volume level. The power button simply lights up in different colours depending on the sampling rate of the input signal (red for 44.1kHz, green for 96kHz, white for DSD). Similarly, the lighting behind the volume buttons changes according to level. It's a little confusing at first, but soon becomes second nature.

The right connections

The Mojo features micro-USB, optical and coax inputs, though the latter takes the form of a 3.5mm jack rather than the usual RCA or BNC, and a second USB connection for charging only. Outputs are limited to a pair of 3.5mm jacks. There's even the flexibility to add

Chord's dedicated streaming module, the Poly (£500), for those that can afford it.

Unlike most rivals, Chord refuses to use off-the-shelf DAC chips inside its converters, instead using powerful programmable processors loaded with proprietary, built-from-the-ground-up software to do the job. It's largely why Chord has enjoyed the success it has.

Once up and running, it's a fabulous performer (and promises to be so for eight hours from a full charge). Stevie Wonder's *Innervisions* on DSD is gripping from the unmistakable opening bars of *Too High* right through to the end of the album. There's ample detail and the kind of insight into the recording that nothing we've heard at this price can better.

But it's not the excellent resolution that impresses us most. It's the Mojo's ability to organise all that information into a cohesive and musical whole that makes it stand out. It can convey power and scale when the music requires, but also has the finesse to make the most of the subtler passages too.

We're also impressed with the Mojo's refinement. Its transparency means poor



The Mojo offers much of the Hugo 2's fidelity and detail but for a good deal less

WHAT HI-FI?

**BEST DAC
£300-£500**

recordings (and sources) will be easy to spot, but this DAC won't go out of its way to be nasty. So in much the same way as it was last year (and the two years before that), the Mojo remains the one to beat at this price.

■ Chord Hugo 2 £1799

The Hugo 2 may have had to relinquish its Product of the Year status, but it's only fallen so far. Continuing its line's remarkable success, it serves both as an improvement over the Mojo and as a more portable version of the Qutest.

Sure, it is portable in that it has a battery (providing around seven hours from a single charge) and you can pick it up (it's only 450g), but it won't sit comfortably in a pocket for on-the-go use like its Mojo sibling. Chord acknowledges its desktop likelihood by the inclusion of a remote, knowing the Hugo 2 is as likely to end up as a DAC/pre-amp in a static system as it is to get out and about.

The Hugo 2 features all the inputs and outputs you could realistically require for either occasion. Its digital optical input (full-size TosLink) is good for digital audio up to 24-bit/192kHz, while the digital coaxial (a 3.5mm socket) functions up to 24-bit/384kHz.

The final physical input is a mini-USB able to deal with information up to 32-bit/768kHz and DSD512. Music can also be fed to Hugo 2 via aptX Bluetooth. There are 3.5mm and 6.3mm headphone

socket outputs, and a pair of stereo RCAs for connection to an amp.

As well as input selection and volume, the Hugo 2 features inscrutable colour-dependent controls for cross-feed and filtering. Chord's great differentiator, its bespoke, highly developed Field Programmable Gate Array, is back in supercharged form.

Where sound is concerned, it is difficult to find meaningful fault with the way the Hugo 2 converts and delivers your digital audio files. The bigger the file and the more information it has to play with, the greater the detail and fidelity of its performance. But in all circumstances it serves up a detailed, dynamic and punchy performance.

A powerful show of unity

Timing is perhaps the Hugo 2's strongest suit of all - it brings absolutely believable unity to ensemble music. There's crispness and clarity to its sound, admirable management of tempos and an unequivocal layout of the soundstage.

From one extreme of the frequency range to the other, the Chord is a

WHAT HI-FI?

**BEST DAC
OVER £1200**



There really isn't another DAC anywhere near this price that can do the job as well

smoothly neutral listen - it doesn't overstate or underplay - it simply arranges the pieces into a convincing whole where bass is balanced against treble in the most unforced manner.

There isn't another DAC around at anywhere near this price able to communicate so torrentially, so unambiguously or so effortlessly. Our affection for it in the past 12 months hasn't wavered one bit.

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WHAT HI-FI?
**BEST STEREO AMPLIFIER
£400-£700**

**PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR**

View offers: whf.cm/BestStereoAmps2018

Rega Brio £599

A 2016 redesign of the much-loved Rega Brio-R gave birth to this current Brio, and those improvements - along with the design's innate brilliance - keep this exceptional amplifier not only at the top of its price bracket but also King Of All Stereo Amp-land.

An analogue-only unit with a half-width design, the Brio sounds terrific. It displays an incredible sense of rhythm, punchy dynamics, instant agility and a fine sense of detail. Despite all that, it still manages to remember that listening to music is, much of the time, about having fun.

One of the Brio-R's few weak points was a sonic leanness that spawned a tendency to become a little over-excitable, meaning you had to be careful with your choice of speakers. This Brio, on the other hand, is much more forgiving than its predecessor, having a fuller, richer sound that has a gorgeous solidity running through every note.

A modest-sounding 50W per channel (into 8 ohms) runs through the

amplifier's veins and, while that might not sound like much, you only have to crank up the breathless wall of sound that is *Judith* from A Perfect Circle's *Mer De Noms* album to feel the sheer force of wailing guitars and thunderous drums from the second you hit play. It goes loud. And it's thrilling.

Despite the satisfying oomph with weighty music, it's this amp's nimble footing and rhythmic prowess that's the true highlight and the thing that makes us play song after song through it.

A unifying force

It ducks and weaves its way around tricky compositions, tying all musical strands together in a way that's authoritative and skilful without ever losing that sense of fun.

The sustained build up of tension in Arvo Pärt's *Fratres* is a real test of the Rega's talents: the strings are light but urgent, and you can hear the screechy texture of the bow scraping across them. The leading edges of notes are

Power, detail, enthusiasm and precision - those are just some of the Brio's qualities

stunningly precise, and there's a depth to the quieter moments that's as impressive as the crescendo is controlled.

Listen to the same songs through the Brio's new headphone socket and you'll find the same presentation: it's a terrifically musical amp.

Thoughtful design and close attention to build quality are crucial ingredients in the Brio's musical banquet. Circuit paths inside the robust aluminium case promote component isolation and so maximise sound quality.

Around the back you'll find four line-level inputs, the inputs for the moving-magnet phono stage and a pair of outputs for recording. A single pair of speaker terminals is also present - and that's it. We can imagine many wanting digital inputs, too - like the similarly priced Cambridge CXA60 - but that amp doesn't have a phono stage, nor does it approach the Brio's sonic heights.

The Brio more than justifies its £600 price. We just want to leave it on and play all our music through it.

■ Marantz PM6006 UK Edition £369

Having made some nicely judged improvements to its CD6006 CD player to tailor it more closely to the UK market (see p45), canny old Marantz has gone and done the same for that player's natural partner, the PM6006 amplifier. The result? A *What Hi-Fi?* Award.

So what, you're surely asking, makes for a UK Edition of an already-beloved integrated amplifier? Is it one whose timbre better matches the complex taste of a bacon butty? Or is it easy-wipe to cope with the damp, drizzly weather? Or perhaps it is portable, designed for those clandestine afterschool trips to the park with a can of cider?

Secret wizardry

In fact, it's a lot more sensible than any of the above. Marantz has taken the opportunity to fine-tune its amplification operation with help from some of the finest technicians in the industry. That said, the company has been intriguingly coy about just what tweaks have been made.

Despite internal changes, outwardly the UK Edition looks identical to the original (apart from some additional branding). The front face is dominated by a pair of dials - one for toggling input

and one for managing volume - flanking a slim-line LED source indicator.

Below the latter is a quartet of buttons for switching between the amp's internal DAC and analogue inputs, between either or both pairs of wireable speakers, and to operate the PM6006's 'loudness' feature, and below them is another trio of dials for bass, treble and balance, plus a 6.3mm headphone jack.

Round the back you'll find five analogue line-ins, a coaxial and two digital inputs, outputs for two pairs of speakers and a tape loop for recording but no USB input.

There's a characteristically full-bodied and focused Marantz presentation with plenty of detail, along with a smooth, wholesome overall tone. The most granular textures aren't always readily on offer but there's more than enough to dig into without the sound becoming overly analytical.

It's all about the music

This is a wonderfully musical amplifier. The balance is tonally even and overall it's pleasingly insightful, with a nice wide soundstage - but even more so it's rhythmically and dynamically confident, knitting together instruments in a



WHAT HI-FI?
BEST STEREO AMPLIFIER
UNDER £400

Some clever, carefully chosen improvements have made a great amp even better

manner that highlights this as a budget-to-midrange gem.

There's a certain smoothness between strands, yet also enough punch and drive to grab your attention, Marantz's keen sense of timing accented by a dynamic range sympathetic to leading notes.

It looks as though Marantz has taken James Bond as its exemplar of Britishness for the PM6006 UK Edition (full-bodied, well connected, smooth, insightful...). Whatever the inspiration, at this price nobody does it better.

■ Rega Elex-R £949

Give Rega's Elex-R a high-five; this is the fifth consecutive year that this amplifier has secured a *What Hi-Fi?* Best Buy Award.

Arcam, Audiolab and Cyrus have all released quality rivals for the Elex-R over the years but none has been able to match the Rega's unique set of talents. This is a very special piece of kit.

The Rega clan is a close-knit family, and the Elex-R resembles its cheaper Brio sibling in a number of ways. Like the Brio it's an all-analogue affair with a quality moving-magnet phono stage - capable of handling turntables costing well over £1000. It, too, has four line-level inputs and a quality of build that immediately inspires confidence.

The casework is functional rather than luxurious but it's neatly finished and feels as though it will last for years. Unlike the Brio, though, it has no headphone output. It certainly takes a lean line when it comes to features, but start listening and you'll soon come to

appreciate the value of this amplifier's single-minded approach.

Listening to the Elex-R is pretty much like having everything that's good about the Brio but lifted a notch higher - all the Brio but with more brawn. This amp delivers a fast, agile sound that's as rhythmically surefooted as we've heard at this level.

A minute or two listening to the tumbling percussion of Arrested Development's *Children Play With Earth* is enough to establish that the Elex-R is head, maybe even shoulders, above anything from its rivals when it comes to rendering rhythms.

There's an addictive sense of liveliness and energy, something most rivals tend to tone down in the search for greater refinement, and it demonstrates authority and scale better than anything we've heard at this price too.

It's equally at home with a classical or vocal-led piece like Nina Simone's *I Put A Spell On You*. There's a newfound sense



WHAT HI-FI?
BEST STEREO AMPLIFIER
£700-£1500

Realism and energy abound here - and it's got rhythm over and above its rivals

of rawness and realism in her deep, guttural delivery, and the Rega conveys nuances better than any of its peers.

The Elex-R might have crept up in price a bit since it last bagged this Award, but if you want to get to the heart of your music and you've got £949 to spend on an amplifier, we'd say spend it here.

View offers: whf.cm/BestStereoAmps2018**■ Moon 240i £1990**

There's something about the equipment from high-end amplifier specialist Moon that looks, well, other-worldly. There's a strong and alluring visual theme running through this manufacturer's range – a neat central control section flanked by curved panels on either side – that's both elegant and futuristic. And in this case, the attractive design (and solid build) is backed up by great performance.

This is one of Moon's 'entry-level' amplifiers, but it has the performance and looks of something far pricier. It's a versatile amp, too, with a generous spread of analogue and digital connections which will appeal to all kinds of listening habits. There are line-level, moving-magnet phono and 3.5mm inputs, along with hi-res-supporting optical, digital and USB connections.

When we sit down to listen to some music we're impressed not just by the 240i's fluid, smooth dynamics, but also by the understated way in which it unearths finer subtleties and ties a song together cohesively. As well as looking more expensive than it is, it sounds it too.

It's also a surprisingly revealing amplifier yet it doesn't shout too loudly about what it reveals, choosing instead to major on subtlety and dynamism. Tom Waits' characteristically raspy tone on *Swordfishtrombones* is packed with layers of detail, but it also has more delicacy than we usually hear at this level.

From the opening staccato strings on Hans Zimmer's *I'm Not A Hero* from *The Dark Knight* soundtrack through into the piece's brooding, claustrophobic horns and percussion, the Moon effortlessly lays bare the subtle sounds and slow build-up of tension.

Rising to the challenge

Faced with a different sonic challenge, such as that posed by Radiohead's *15 Step* or The Dead Weather's *60 Feet Tall*, the Moon remains unflappable. Its sense of timing is agile and precise, leaving the instrumental strands in those pieces pulled taut and neatly organised.

If you favour all-out muscle and attack, however, this may not be the amplifier for you. The £1600 Rega Elicit-R's leaner character is better at delivering the crunchy, distorted guitars of Marilyn

**WHAT HI-FI?****BEST STEREO AMPLIFIER
£1500-£2500**

Judge this book by its cover – it sounds as smooth, subtle as cohesive as it looks

Manson's *Killing Strangers* and has a little more bite and attitude with songs that need it, such as Eminem's *The Way I Am*. Instead, this Moon is all about communicating the spirit of a song faithfully. In that sense, it's captivating.

The 240i's graceful, understated character means it'll play nice with most sources and speakers, but you'll need to match it with seriously capable kit to really show off its subtleties. Do that and you'll be richly rewarded.

■ Roksan Blak £2799

Unlike some of its fellow winners in this section, the mighty Roksan Blak (whose idea was that name?) eschews the minimalist approach and goes all out to be compatible with a range of sources.

If you want just a premium line-level analogue integrated, we would point you towards the company's also-excellent Caspian M2 (£2000), but if you need a fully equipped unit that can connect to your computer, smartphone, turntable and headphones the Blak makes a mighty strong case for itself. Especially when you consider how muscular it is; it's rated at 150W per channel into eight ohms, rising to 230W as impedance halves.

It's not just meaty on power though; at 14kg it's physically hefty too, and when it comes to build quality there's a real feeling of solidity. It's nicely finished as well, and – one or two minor design oddities aside – it's a pleasure to use, even if the oversized display is a little Janet-and-John in appearance.

Traditionalists will be kept happy with balanced XLRs, three single-ended line-level inputs and a moving-magnet

phono stage. Those into digital get a USB Type B that will cope with 24-bit/192kHz PCM as well as DSD music files, and there's aptX Bluetooth connectivity too.

After running this beast in for a few days, we hear the full benefit of the Roksan's enthusiastic, muscular presentation. Gustav Holst's *Mars* comes over with a full dose of power and authority. Lower frequencies and crescendos, in particular, are conveyed with real density and texture, while the music's wide-ranging dynamics are meticulously delivered. And the Roksan takes it all comfortably in its stride.

Changing tack to Billie Holiday's poignant version of *Sophisticated Lady*, the Blak reveals it's more than capable of delivering a generous helping of nuance, texture and refinement; Ben Webster's saxophone solo is as wonderfully warm and breathy as ever.

We try out the moving-magnet phono stage and are pleased with what we hear. It's a lively-sounding circuit, reflecting the insight and transparency delivered through the line inputs. The Bluetooth

**WHAT HI-FI?****BEST STEREO AMPLIFIER
OVER £2500**

The muscular Blak goes all out to cater for both analogue and digital sources

performance however, perhaps unsurprisingly, is audibly thinner and less expressive.

This is a finely judged amplifier. Its power and composure are beyond question, it has enough in the way of insight and detail to satisfy the purists and it's capable of sounding perfectly at home with a wide range of sources and speakers. Buy with confidence.



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WHAT HI-FI?
**BEST STANDMOUNT
SPEAKER £1000-£2000**

**PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR**

View offers: whf.cm/BestStereoSpeakers2018

■ KEF R3 £1300

What if you could capture the essence and brilliantly complete performance of KEF's mighty Reference 1 standmounts, but at a fraction of their £5000 price?

Enter the new R3s. Part of the company's recently introduced premium R series, they offer a large chunk of the Reference 1s' engineering content as well as sonic performance, but for almost a quarter of the price.

A distinctive driver array

KEF's distinctive Uni-Q driver array is at the heart of these speakers, but here with a refined motor assembly, suspension and drive unit. While it may look like a single drive unit, it's in fact a two-way arrangement where the 25mm aluminium-dome tweeter is positioned right in the throat of the 12.5cm midrange driver.

The R3s are a three-way design, so there's a dedicated 16.5cm bass driver with a rear-firing port. Such a three-way configuration means that each driver can be optimised to work in its specific

frequency band and tuned with less compromise than a two-way alternative.

The shaped trim around the Uni-Q driver doesn't just make the front panel look balanced by echoing the size of the larger bass driver, it also helps to reduce diffraction effects at the cabinet edges. That slim front looks smart and offers advantages in rigidity and dispersion.

Overall build quality is terrific for the money. The enclosure feels immensely rigid thanks to some clever bracing techniques that combine reinforcement with damping. All the edges are crisp and the gloss finish on our black samples is lovely. The R3s are also available in gloss white and a more traditional walnut.

Despite being relatively slim and compact boxes, standing only 42cm tall, the R3s are capable of delivering a good amount of bass weight and authority. In our test room they sound best balanced well away from all walls.

The Uni-Q array disperses the sound in a wide and consistent manner, so toe-in angle towards the listening

KEF's Uni-Q driver cleverly sits the tweeter right in the throat of its midrange driver

position isn't as critical as it is with most conventional rivals for stereo imaging.

Excellent midrange clarity

We revel in the R3s' excellent midrange clarity and ability to render the subtle dynamic nuances with delicacy. The KEFs capture the natural acoustic of a recording superbly, showing a level of insight and detail resolution that's way beyond most rivals.

Despite all the analysis it remains a musical performer, one that excels in both dynamic range and rhythmic sense, focusing our attention on the message rather than the mechanics of replay.

The KEFs also offer sonic scale and authority belying their physical size, delivering an excellent stereo soundstage that is precisely organised. Tonally, the presentation is balanced and natural - mercifully free of showy false emphasis in any frequency band.

Choosing a Product of the Year from such a wide range of top-quality speakers is usually a real headache. Not this year.

■ Dali Spektor 2 £199

Some budget speakers use fancy design or obscure features to grab your attention. Not so the Spektor 2s. These speakers have earned their place in these pages by sheer conventional brilliance.

There's everything we would expect from a typical £200 box here, from two-way driver configuration and ported bass tuning right the way through to the 25mm dome tweeter and 13cm driver.

Precise and energetic

But the stats only tell you so much. Let them run in over a couple of days and feed them with a good system - we used Marantz's CD6006 UK Edition CD player and Rega's Brio amplifier as well as a Denon D-M41 micro system - and these speakers sparkle.

Mounted on solid stands and looking smart in their Walnut finish (Black Ash is also available), the 2s deliver a breadth of talent few similarly priced alternatives can match.

Play Aretha Franklin's *Natural Woman* and the Spektors excel with its distinctive and powerful vocals. They're delivered with nuance and passion; each word is crisply defined with no room for

doubt as to the emotion behind the lyrics. We like the cohesive way these speakers handle the instrumental backdrop too, delivering the music with finesse, precision and energy.

Moving onto Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* proves the Spektors capable of high volume levels and a decent degree of composure when pushed hard. There's a pleasing level of resolution here along with the ability to organise that information into an involving and musical whole.

The way these speakers handle dynamics is impressive; they're fluid and expressive, rendering both large-scale swings and low-level subtleties with equal verve. The result is that these Dalis have the ability to draw the listener into the music in a way that eludes even the best of their rivals.

Q Acoustics comes close with the refined and energetic 3010i from its revamped 3000 series - a direct price rival - but even those lack the scale and dynamic reach of the Dalis.

Tonally, the Spektor 2s have a full-bodied yet balanced presentation. This means they're easy to partner and



Unassuming yet wildly talented, these are still the best budget speakers around

WHAT HI-FI?

BEST STANDMOUNT SPEAKER UNDER £200

less fussy about rough or overly aggressive recordings.

If you're looking to get the best speakers you can buy for less than £200, nothing else at this price will give you such a well-judged blend of detail and outright entertainment.

■ Monitor Audio Bronze 2 £279

Quality speakers come and go, but Monitor Audio's Bronze 2s have been quietly and consistently collecting the Award in this price bracket for the past four years. With competition as fierce as it is in this sector, that's no mean feat.

The company is known for turning out classy boxes and these 2s reinforce this reputation. These boxes are solidly made, the quality of finish is terrific, and they're available in four vinyl finishes: Black Oak, Walnut, Rosemah and White Ash.

A lesson in composure

It's worth playing around with the toe-in angle to firm up the stereo imaging, but even so, these speakers aren't especially demanding - something that points to well-designed drive units and a carefully calibrated crossover.

We start with Debussy's *Clair de lune*, and it's a test that these Monitor Audios sail through. There's nothing showy in the presentation but these speakers have delicacy when required and handle dynamics deftly. There's plenty of insight here, from the way notes' trailing edges

decay gracefully into silence to the Bronzes' ability to track subtle pace changes. It's a spellbinding performance, far superior to what we're used to hearing at this level.

These standmounters have a chance to show off their impressively assured bass as we move to Hans Zimmer's *Inception* soundtrack. Low frequencies are full-bodied yet articulate and delivered with plenty of control. This confident low-end performance gives tracks such as *Mombasa* a firm foundation delivered with authority.

We're impressed by the Bronze 2s' ability to stay composed, even at relatively high volume levels. For the most part there are no rough edges here. This is a carefully honed pair of speakers that brim with refinement.

Built to last

It's not often you find such sonic polymaths at this price, but the Bronze 2s really are multi-talented. For their size they dig deep in the bass but are tonally balanced and deliciously detailed too.



This is the Bronze 2s' fourth Award, and we wouldn't bet against them making it five

WHAT HI-FI?

BEST STANDMOUNT SPEAKER £200-£350

Add solid build and a high standard of finish and there's much to applaud here.

The newer Q Acoustics 3020i are worthy rivals (and equally well finished) but even they can't top the Bronze 2s. When it comes to next year's Awards, we wouldn't bet against these speakers making it five in a row.

■ Mission QX-2 £399

You've got to have guts launching a pair of standmounters in the affordable end of the speaker market. Guts and know-how. Buyers in this segment demand a level of performance markedly better than you'll find in the budget arena but are still conscious of the cost.

Thankfully, Mission has both - hence the arrival of these hugely capable QX-2s.

At 32cm high and almost as deep, they are a chunky proposition, needing stands with a decently large top plate to sit comfortably. They feature the company's distinctive tweeter-under-mid/bass arrangement. The advantage being it makes the distance between the acoustic centres of both drive units and the listener more even, so delivering a more coherent sound.

The drive units are a little unusual too. The 38mm tweeter is a ring-radiator design with a shaped phase plug in the centre. The backpressure from the diaphragm vents into twin rear chambers, helping reduce resonance and maintain a wide operating bandwidth.

That 15cm mid/bass uses a smooth pulp/acrylic fibre cone that doesn't have

a dust cap. This kind of design tends to have a cleaner response while looking pretty tidy to boot.

A rear-firing slot reflex port is used to augment the mid/bass's low frequency output, so best not to shove your QX-2s right up against the back wall. We place the speakers about 80cm out into our listening room, but encourage some placement experimentation.

Agility and insight

These boxes are fun, having a lovely energetic character that grips you and refuses to let go. We start with Macklemore and Ryan Lewis's *Can't Hold Us* and the Missions revel in the song's momentum. They charge along with a sharp sense of timing and agility, delivering plenty of insight as they go. The thumping bass line is tight and punchy and there's a surprising amount of weight for a speaker of this size.

As we change gear to Tchaikovsky's *Marché Slave Op. 31* the QX-2s respond in turn. They're wildly expressive and are able to tie the dense instrumentation into a cohesive and musical whole.

WHAT HI-FI?

BEST STANDMOUNT SPEAKER £350-£500



This distinctive configuration of drivers helps deliver a more coherent sound

There's a decent degree of refinement here and we like how Mission's engineers have seamlessly integrated the drive units. Avoid any overly bright or aggressive partnering equipment and you're onto a winner.

The QX-2s are simply terrific; their infectious energetic character makes them a pleasure to listen to with any music. If those KEF Q350s are too much of a stretch, these will do you proud.

■ KEF Q350 £500

KEF can't be too upset about its Q350 standmounters being knocked off the Product of the Year perch they occupied last year. After all, their replacements are the company's own stunning R3s.

The secret of KEF's success might well have something to do with its trademark Uni-Q design, in which the tweeter sits inside the larger driver - in the case of the Q350s a 16.5cm mid/bass unit - to aid frequency integration and improve sound dispersion. That, and a generously sized rear-firing bass port.

Class-leading insight

The visual theme here is very much modern, clean, tidy and minimalist. The cabinets themselves are sturdy and nicely finished and come in two satin options: black or white, with black or silver Uni-Q drivers to match.

All KEF's development work has paid off: the Q350s display a level of clarity and subtlety unheard of at this price.

We are stunned by their ability to reveal the layers of detail in Hans Zimmer's *Interstellar* soundtrack. The speakers dig deep to unearth nuances

while maintaining an impressive sense of scale, composure and precision. It's all well organised, and we can't complain about the way these standmounters convey timing either.

The Q350s also sound wonderfully even across the frequency band, and the treble performance in particular is detailed and sweet - nicely crisp without ever becoming so bright you're inclined to wince.

There's also an ability to keep instruments cleanly separate, delivering insight enough into each melodic strand even as a piece comes hurtling towards you in a luscious wall of sound.

There is perhaps sometimes a tendency to favour refinement and articulacy over allowing the Q350s to let their hair down, but this is an innately musical performance nonetheless.

A cut above the rest

In terms of system matching, we suggest the superb Rega Brio (£600) stereo amplifier as a good starting point. It complements the KEF's sound, and brings a degree of natural warmth and



WHAT HI-FI?

BEST STANDMOUNT SPEAKER £500-£750

The Q350s offer transparency that will keep up with upgrades in the rest of your system

drive. If your budget extends to something even more capable, then the Q350s have the transparency and sonic stretch to make the most of any extra information made available.

KEF can hold its head up high: the Q350s are a cut above the rest. Yes, there may be rivals able to offer a little more energy, but they aren't capable of getting near these two-time Award winners for insight or clarity.

■ Revel Concerta2 M16 £999

Revel is not a widely known name in the UK, and we think that's a shame. Its products are almost universally well engineered, nicely built and perform brilliantly. The Concerta2 M16 certainly ticks all those boxes - it's a terrific product, and one that thoroughly deserves its third consecutive Award in this mid-price speaker category.

These medium-sized, single-wired wooden boxes pack a 25mm dome tweeter and a ported 16cm mid/bass driver. The unusual dished waveguide in front of the tweeter isn't just there to make things look interesting. It controls the directivity of the unit, making it closer to that of the mid/bass driver at crossover frequencies with the aim of improving integration.

It really seems to pay off because these speakers deliver a wide, open soundstage without fussing too much about the amount they're angled in towards the listening position. They do like to be a good 30cm from the rear wall though, we found.

Rachmaninov's *Piano Concerto No2 in C Minor* asks a lot of any hi-fi kit, but the M16s rise to the challenge. They render

an impressively expansive stereo image and populate it with precisely focused sounds. Instruments are nicely layered, too, and remain stable and agile when the arrangement gets busy.

Scale and subtlety

Perhaps even more impressive is the enthusiasm with which these standmounters deliver large-scale dynamics. They pound out the piece's crescendos with relish, refusing to harden up or compress the music even at high volumes and digging deep into the bass to create a sound of real authority. Close your eyes and you'd swear you were hearing decent-sized floorstanders.

Such low-end ability comes in handy with tracks such as Major Lazer's *Pon De Floor*. Here the bass kicks hard and true, while the speaker's excellent attack and firm grasp of rhythmic drive ensures a full dose of excitement.

They sound big, yes, but subtle too, as a rewarding session spent listening to Ólafur Arnalds and Dusty Springfield reveals. A superbly integrated midrange communicates Dusty's voice with all the refinement and passion with which she



WHAT HI-FI?
BEST STANDMOUNT
SPEAKER £750-£1000

The M16s' dished waveguard helps control directivity of the tweeter and aid its integration

sings it, while the speakers' ability to organise without sounding controlling works wonders with the former's *Broadchurch* soundtrack.

You need to take care in system matching - a ruthless edge means they can easily be provoked if the partnering kit is already a touch on the aggressive side - but that doesn't dent our enthusiasm too much.

The M16s are still a bundle of fun and entertain in a way few price rivals can.

■ Dynaudio Special Forty £2500

Let's face it: the Dynaudio Special Forty standmounters aren't that special to look at. Yes, the high-gloss Birch finish is lovely - whether in grey or red - but there seems little to differentiate the Fortys from a stack of cheaper products the company has made in the past.

Things start to look brighter once we delve into the details. Launched to celebrate Dynaudio's 40th anniversary, they use drivers based on those found in the company's high-end Confidence CI model at 10 times this price.

Its engineers have then worked on improving airflow and damping behind the 28mm tweeter dome to reduce back-pressure as the diaphragm moves, increasing detail and lowering distortion, and also tweaked the motor system. The results show a marked improvement in sound quality.

Positioning is simple - we end up with them placed on solid stands, a metre or so from the rear wall with just a hint of angle towards the listening position. Most price-compatible amplifiers will be happy driving these speakers.

When it comes to sound quality, we keep coming back to three words in our notes: confident, muscular and subtle. We start with Holst's *Mars* and the Special Fortys respond with glee. They sound far bigger and more authoritative than a speaker that stands 36cm high has any right to.

A balance of weight and agility

Part of this is down to powerful, well extended bass that balances weight and agility superbly. The rest is a combination of composure and dynamic reach that allows these boxes to take everything the Roman God of War, as depicted by Holst, throws at them.

They image well too, the orchestra being organised with precision and stability. There's a good sense of depth as well, and we like the tonality. These are even, cohesive and nicely balanced.

They're also magnificently detailed. We love, for example, the way they reveal the texture and attitude in Jill Scott's voice on *Gettin' In The Way*. There's a natural fluidity to the midrange



WHAT HI-FI?
BEST STANDMOUNT
SPEAKER OVER £2000

Dynaudio has improved airflow and damping behind the Special Fortys' tweeter

dynamics, and we admire the ability to tie a multitude of instrumental strands in a convincing, well-timed yet musical way. They're surefooted when it comes to timing and rhythms too, as happy charging along with gusto as they are applying any necessary sensitivity.

So, don't let the common-place looks fool you. You'll soon be having too much fun listening to think about visuals.

■ **Fyne Audio F302 £399**

Never heard of Fyne Audio? Don't feel bad or in any way out of the loop - this is a very new company, whose Scottish background means the word 'Fyne' can be legitimately deployed without it becoming a tiresome pun.

These F302 floorstanders were among the first speakers we heard from the company, and what a good impression they made.

A two-way, rear-ported design, they house a 25mm polyester dome tweeter and 15cm multi-fibre mid/bass driver in each of their relatively sturdy cabinets.

With the plinths adding a little more width to the overall footprint, it feels as though you're getting a lot of speaker for the money - though you won't be greasing the sides of the door frames to squeeze them in to your living room.

Consumately class leaders

It doesn't take us long to conclude that these are class leaders. We listen to albums beginning to end - an acid test passed only by the most engaging products - and there's no greater praise we can offer Fyne Audio than that.

We play Bon Iver's *22, A Million* and from the outset we're met with a confident, forward presentation - but one with all the detail and refinement we might expect from the best standmounters at this price.

The texture in those opening vocal loops offers a sense of movement and anticipation over a flatlining drone and quite luscious warmth to Justin Vernon's trademark choral harmonies. The presentation also feels spacious, both in terms of width and depth. While it's also full bodied, the bass is taut and doesn't obstruct the F302s' keen rhythmic sense.

It's nice to see insight, precise timing and a wide dynamic range given as much prominence as power, bass and a wide soundstage in such a modestly priced floorstander. The Fynes' skill in this area is demonstrated by the way the grimy percussive loops of tracks such as *10 d E A T h b R E a s T* cut through and the meandering *29 #Strafford APTS* is allowed to trickle downstream without fear of becoming stagnant.

These tracks also highlight how adept the F302s are at capturing the



The F302s offer a mature sonic performance, able to capture the essence of a track

production as well as the character of the music. This is a mature sonic performance indeed.

It's rare to find floorstanding all-rounders at less than £500 able to compete favourably in every respect with the wealth of quality standmount speakers available at the same price, but the F302s manage it. Welcome, Fyne Audio - your place at the top table is very well deserved.

■ **Dali Oberon 5 £699**

There are no magic ingredients here, no cutting-edge technology to explain the Oberon 5s' unusually talented nature. Just careful engineering and steady refinements of design ideas that Dali has pursued across its ranges for years.

The Oberon 5s are compact two-way towers, standing just 83cm tall and just over 16cm wide. There are a pair of 13cm mid/bass drivers and a larger-than-usual 29mm soft dome tweeter. The mid/bass drivers use the company's favoured wood fibre/fine-grain paper pulp cone, claimed to deliver the drive unit holy grail of high rigidity with low resonance.

When it comes to positioning, the Oberon 5s like to be a little away from the back wall and firing straight ahead, rather than angled towards the listening position, but they're not too fussy and shouldn't present any issues for a good, price-compatible amplifier.

Once run in, these speakers reveal themselves as terrific performers. They're responsive, musical but, most of all, fun. They sound right at home among the complex rhythms and dense production of Radiohead's *In Rainbows*.

But they bring out the emotion too, highlighting the haunting nature of *Videotape* or the uplifting change of gear in *15 Step's* instrumental break.

The Oberons have the dynamic subtlety, rhythmic precision and sheer transparency to make the most of such things and really draw the listener in.

A fine dynamic reach

They're detailed too, revealing low-level instrumental strands with ease, but also managing to arrange that information in a composed and organised way. The leading edges of notes are well defined, but not highlighted unnaturally. The sound simply flows in an organic and convincing manner.

Particularly striking is the treble, which is crisp and biting without ever becoming brittle or shrill. It also blends seamlessly with the speaker's expressive midrange performance. The Oberons sound great with voices, squeezing the last drop of emotional impact from Nina Simone's heart-breaking *Strange Fruit*.

We move onto Prokofiev's *Romeo And Juliet* where the Dalis show-off their fine



The Oberon 5s use wood fibre/paper pulp cones to deliver rigidity and low resonance

dynamic reach and ability to render low-level shifts with skill. Despite being compact, those twin mid/bass drivers still deliver plenty in the way of low-frequency punch and authority, and go loud enough in all but the very largest of domestic settings.

In that case you may need to consider larger, more powerful alternatives; for everyone else, there's nothing not to like about the Oberon 5s.

■ Fyne Audio F501 £1199

Not many manufacturers win Awards in their first year of existence, but to pick up two seems extraordinary. Look a little closer, though, and it all begins to make sense. Though in its infancy as a brand, Fyne Audio's seven-strong management team represents a kind of supergroup of industry minds. Combined, they bring more than 200 years of experience - and deliver results that reflect that fact.

On a technical level, its F501 floorstanders are an intriguing combination of the predictable and the unusual. It's the broad strokes that are pretty predictable: a two-and-a-half way design utilising a 25mm tweeter, 15cm mid/bass driver and 15cm bass driver, nominal impedance of 8 ohms and 90dB sensitivity won't raise any eyebrows at this kind of money.

But the tweeter - a highly rigid titanium dome - sits in the throat of the mid/bass driver in an arrangement Fyne is calling IsoFlare. And at the bottom of the cabinet it has employed something it calls a 'BassTrax Tractrix Diffuser System', combining a fairly conventional downward-firing port above a carefully profiled, conical diffuser.

First off, we give the F501s the chance to show off their chops with Diana Krall's version of *Almost Blue*. This is a high-gloss hi-fi recording, with painstakingly recorded piano and close-mic'd vocal supported by stand-up bass, brushed drum kit and economical guitar - and the F501s lap it up.

Initial impressions are of a broad, well defined sound stage, solid stereo focus and a lavish amount of detail. No nuance of Krall's phrasing, no creak of double-bass fretboard, no lingering decay of a piano note is ignored.

While laying out the last scrap of information, the F501s don't sacrifice the coherence or unity of a performance - timing and integration are excellent.

Beautifully even tonality

Upping the assertiveness quotient, we switch to *Burn With Me* by DJ Koze and find a beautifully even, consistent tonality which, along with the sweet timing and transparency, paints a very convincing picture.

Moving to *Rhapsody in Blue* by the Los Angeles Philharmonic under Leonard Bernstein allows the F501s to again

Fyne combines a down-firing bass port with a carefully profiled, conical diffuser

WHAT HI-FI?
**BEST FLOORSTANDING
SPEAKER £1000-£1500**

demonstrate their fine grasp of timing and reveal their dynamic prowess.

Treble response is absolutely as confident and assertive as it can be without becoming hard or tiring, but the Fyne Audios' top end isn't impossible to provoke so make sure you avoid using these speakers with lean electronics.

Launching a floorstander into this lion's-cage of a market sector is a bold move indeed but, with the F501s, Fyne has shown all the others the way.

■ ProAc Response DT8 £1950

Another first-time winner, and another Award we feel is richly deserved, these towers turn in as musically cohesive a performance as we've heard at this price.

And thank goodness, because the Response DT8s are not the easiest on the eye. The use of two types of 16.5cm mid/bass driver working in tandem may be clever from an engineering point of view, but visually it unsettles us.

Why use two types of driver? In engineering terms, there's always a trade-off between the optimisation of midrange and bass performance in a drive unit.

By using different drivers working in tandem, ProAc's engineers have attempted to get the best of all worlds - a polypropylene cone in the top unit shoots for natural mids, and a stiff poly mica diaphragm in the lower to deliver powerful, articulate bass. A down-firing port completes the arrangement.

So, does ProAc's plan work? We play Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* and the DT8s respond with a large-scale sound full of force and fury. They deliver the

music's high-octane dynamic swings with enthusiasm and plenty of punch, yet have the skill to render the subtleties with care.

Tonally, they are a little forward, but they have enough by way of refinement to prevent this being an issue. We would still avoid overly bright or aggressive electronics, though.

Detail levels are high, with the DT8s able to resolve layers of information and organise it in a cohesive manner. They render instrumental texture superbly, and deliver slight changes in intensity and drive well.

An expansive sonic canvas

Stereo imaging is lovely too. These speakers paint on an expansive sonic canvas, locating instruments with precision and stability. The orchestra is laid out convincingly, with the sound extending well beyond the space between the speakers.

These ProAc's are good at conveying the momentum on hard-charging tracks as well, keeping all energy intact.

ProAc aims for the best of both worlds with its two types of mid/bass driver

WHAT HI-FI?
**BEST FLOORSTANDING
SPEAKER £1500-£2000**

While the presence of two types of driver gave us doubts at first, we're impressed by the DT8s' expressive and transparent midrange performance. Voices come through with clarity, and are nicely separated from complex instrumental backdrops.

We think you'll love the entertaining, articulate sound of these ProAc's. At this price, we wouldn't want anything else.

■ Spondor A7 £2995

Earlier this year, Spondor expanded its A-Line speaker range with these superb floorstanders. They sound great, they look great and they're compact enough to fit into most homes.

There's nothing flash about these speakers; standing 93cm tall they just exude a simple elegance. Build quality is first-rate, and you can choose Black Ash, Dark Walnut or Natural Oak for the wood veneer finish, with a Satin White option costing an extra £300.

These are two-way speakers. Each has an 18cm mid/bass driver and a 22mm tweeter with a wide surround which helps disperse the sound further.

Position them correctly - around 20-30cm away from a wall or corners - and you'll reap the rewards. The Spondors have rear-firing slot-shaped reflex ports to reduce noise and distortion, and to give better grip on bass than a conventional tube-shaped port can generally manage.

Don't push them up against a wall or you'll lose a lot of that open character. We'd also toe the speakers in slightly towards the listening position to get that

gorgeous stereo imaging and solid focus for vocals.

This is a big sound, packed with insight and great dynamics. Detail levels are fantastic, with each instrumental strand and vocal quirk laid bare. The sound is terrifically clean and organised, but where other Spondors prioritised refinement, these A7s also pack in bags of punch to keep things sounding lively.

A flair for rhythm

In case you're worried that this all sounds a bit clinical, relax. These Spondors are wonderfully expressive. Vocals are a particular highlight. We play *Liability* by Lorde and that emotionally laden voice sounds gorgeous - focused, tangible and intimate.

Despite their relatively compact size, these speakers also go satisfyingly deep, and keep a firm grip on the bassline of Massive Attack's *Angel*. Each note is pulled taut, and the edges are precise but wrapped in layers of texture.

The song's relentless, brooding momentum never lets up, and the Spondors remain agile and controlled



WHAT HI-FI?
BEST FLOORSTANDING
SPEAKER OVER £2000

Spondor's A7s exude a simple elegance and a sound worthy of our premium prize

throughout, handling each musical strand like a veteran puppet master.

If we're looking for even the tiniest flaw, more raucous tunes could do with a bit more brawn behind them, but that's a trifling concern against the A7s' stunning precision, clarity and subtlety.

Factor in their hugely enjoyable dynamics and flair for rhythm and we're sold on them as our top premium speaker choice.

■ Ruark Audio MR1 Mk2 £329

It's two in a row for Ruark here as the excellent MR1 Mk2s retain their Award. And so they should; these are wonderfully musical speakers, delivering rich detail and fluid dynamics in a way that you wouldn't expect from such diminutive boxes.

There's plenty of space between instruments in the airy soundstage, which means that music takes on an expansive feel that makes most of the MR1 Mk2s' competition sound congested in comparison.

The dominant bassline in SBTRKT's *Wildfire* is taut and packs a punch. The MR1s have no trouble in rendering its deep, squelchy texture. They time well too; the magnificent pomp of David Bowie's *Magic Dance* blares through the Ruarks with terrific verve and sparkle.

Hi-fi level of insight

Thanks to an expressive midrange, voices sound lovely. Bella Hardy's *The Driving of the Deer* is delivered with the kind of effortless drive and insight we'd expect from decent hi-fi speakers.

There's a pleasing solidity underpinning the rich, warm midrange, and the elegance with which her lilting, nimble vocals are delivered is simply gorgeous.

The MR1 Mk2s are lovely to listen to, but their stylish retro looks are a huge part of the charm too - though the rotary control dial on the top adds a contemporary touch.

Another modern feature is the optical input that can support hi-res audio up to 24-bit/192kHz. It joins a 3.5mm aux input and a subwoofer out at the back of the right speaker, which houses all amplification and connections.

These Mk2 Ruarks are delightful to use and listen to. In our view, no other powered speaker like this sounds better.

"There's a pleasing solidity underpinning the rich, warm midrange, and the elegance with which her lilting, nimble vocals are delivered is simply gorgeous."



WHAT HI-FI?
BEST DESKTOP
SPEAKER

■ Acoustic Energy AE1 Active £1000

In some ways, it's a shame that this particular category of speaker is not price specific, because the AE1 Actives outperform many more expensive components. In fact, in this case we've been struggling to come up with alternative separates that can match the Acoustic Energys' talents.

They're relatively straightforward when it comes to set-up and function. Simply connect them to your source via either their RCA or balanced XLR inputs and you're ready to go.

Each drive unit is fed by a dedicated 50W class A/B power amplifier module, while dials at the back of each cabinet allow for treble adjustment and bass cut - up or down by 2dB - which is handy if your placement options force you into a sonic compromise.

The AE1s deserve decent, hefty speaker stands. They never cross a line with our lighter speaker stands, but the sturdier the better - and they're well worthy of more than an MDF bookshelf.

Their presentation is forward, but that's not to say they lack subtlety or dimension; they're just endearingly

excitable. We get through a hefty chunk of our library over a number of days, and with each album the AE1s' response is absolutely a delight.

Ever-climbing anticipation

Play Soulwax's *FROM DEEWEE* and the speakers' character reveals itself almost from the outset. The rising synthesizer phrases of *Present Tense* ring with clarity and vigour - there is granular detail to their waveforms and an ever-climbing sense of anticipation.

With *Masterplanned* we get a sense of the AE1s' fine integration and balance. The synth hook stabs away at the low end, with substantial body in the midrange to showcase the vocal melody, and control over potentially coarse percussion in the treble.

We're also treated to these speakers' impressive punch and drive. Rhythms jab as much as time well, able to contrast often quite ghostly vocal lines with the verve and swagger of their synth-led polyrhythmic accompaniments.

Frankly, once we'd sat down to reacquaint ourselves with these



WHAT HI-FI?
BEST ACTIVE SPEAKER

The AE1s aren't particularly fussy with placement, but are well worthy of decent stands

delightful speakers, it didn't take us long to decide that they should be winners in their class. If you're looking for active speakers, you owe it to yourself to audition these.

BEST VOCAL TRACKS FOR TESTING

Some voices are bigger than others, but it takes all sorts to comprise a decent test for your system



Kate Bush Top Of The City

One of Kate's best vocal performances at her 2014 *Before The Dawn* London shows is also, not that surprisingly, one of the most accomplished executions she's ever committed to tape.

Her other-worldly ability to near-whisper one line into the mic and belt down the next is fully to the fore. Go for the original *The Red Shoes* album version rather than 2011's *Director's Cut*, as the latter features a tragically restrained vocal delivery.



Nina Simone Strange Fruit

While Simone's dramatic cover of Abel Meeropol's sobering protest poem (most famously performed by Billie Holiday) doesn't perhaps show off her vocal dexterity as much as many of her numerous hits, it's a triumph of low-level dynamic craft.

The most insightful kit should reveal very few static moments in what is a comparably low-key yet highly arresting vocal, nor ignore the effect of its starkly minimal piano accompaniment.



The National Demons

Thick, cavernous and resonant (albeit with the range of a teaspoon), Matt Berninger's baritone has become one of the most recognisable in popular music - thanks in great part to its soothing depths and his rare ability to at once be so mellifluous within melodies.

Demons is one of his most sure-footed, more-monotonous-than-most deliveries, which is sure to give your mid/bass driver a good run for its money.



Bon Iver 715 - CRΣΣKS

Unless you have your system connected to your TV, there's a very good chance you won't have heard Darth Vader through it. If you're now sitting there thinking what a pity that is, the next best thing is listening to this.

A radical departure from his trademark falsetto, Justin Vernon's completely unaccompanied vocal seeps from a thick vocoder cloud, with warmth belying its digital genes that a decent mid/bass driver should lap up.

SYSTEMS

From all-in-one speakers to a system for vinyl, this category has never been so varied

WHAT HI-FI?
**BEST ALL-IN-ONE
SYSTEM**



**PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR**

View offers: whf.cm/BestSystems2018

KEF LS50 Wireless £1999

Is it any surprise seeing the KEF LS50 Wireless at the top of this category? Where most systems are one-box systems that fall into the "just-add-speakers" variety, KEF has incorporated all the box-bound features into the stereo speakers themselves. It is a genuinely all-in-one streaming system that gives us not a glimpse but a full look at the hi-fi of the future.

Based on the Award-winning LS50, these wireless cousins are beautifully built and finished, with some clever technology packed into a convenient (yet stylish and modern) package.

All in the box

These are true active speakers – each drive unit has a dedicated power amplifier. A 30W Class A/B circuit feeds the tweeter, while a 200W Class D module powers the mid/bass unit. The digital signal path is 24-bit/192kHz capable, and there's a dedicated DAC for each drive unit. You also get pre-amp functionality, a streamer, Bluetooth and

Tidal built in. Any music stored on a NAS unit, computer or smartphone on your home network can also be replayed.

At the rear of the right speaker you'll find stereo analogue and USB Type B connectors alongside the optical socket. You'll also find a subwoofer connection and an ethernet socket.

But none of this would matter if they didn't also deliver on pure performance terms, and the speakers are easily on par with more traditional set ups.

The LS50 Wireless sound wonderfully clean and precise, digging up so much detail and delivering it in an organised and stable manner. We're struck by the KEFs' subtlety and ability to generate strong dynamic shifts.

They deliver a lovely, expansive soundstage that's neatly layered and nicely defined, and they're able to go pretty loud, too.

Playing Massive Attack's *Angel* shows the LS50s' impressive bass performance. These aren't big speakers so you won't get really deep floor shaking bass, but

KEF has taken a whole system and loaded it into a pair of superbly talented speakers

they generate low frequencies that are taut, articulate and punchy.

Insightful and transparent

The good news continues higher up the range with a transparent and fluid midrange and insightful highs. Vocals are delivered with passion while percussion comes through with bite and composure. The LS50s are rhythmic too, delivering the song's unmistakable momentum with determination, allowing the song's natural flow to come through.

Overall, these speakers have the insight to unravel a recording yet never go so far as to tear the music apart. They're informative but always musical with it.

KEF has done a terrific job here. It has taken the Award-winning LS50s and made them an even better proposition.

And despite all KEF's clever thinking and implementation, it's the performance that keeps the LS50 Wireless our Product of the Year for a second year running.

■ Denon D-M41DAB £379

Denon has dominated the micro system category for as long as we care to remember, and the D-M41DAB continues its unrivalled reign.

The big news when this model arrived last year was that Denon had added Bluetooth to its micro system for the first time. That alone would be cause for celebration, but Denon also claims its new analogue amplifier circuit, with its shortened signal paths, offers greater clarity and avoids sources of interference. This is part of what Denon dubs its Triple Noise Reduction Design, which also encompasses careful separation of analogue and digital circuits plus precision signal grounding.

It also says distortion from the input selector, volume control and power amplifier is better suppressed for the cleanest possible sound.

On the outside, though, the only way to tell the D-M41DAB apart from its predecessors is that the CD drive and display screen have swapped places, and the screen itself is flatter than before, meaning less reflection.

More significant is the removal of the USB input. There are still analogue and

digital optical inputs for playing music from external sources, but it means no more memory sticks.

The redesign is more than just a tweak, then, and the rewards are obvious. We suspected the D-M41DAB would be good, we just had no way of knowing it would be this much better than its Award-winning predecessor.

Throwing shade

The whole character of the system has been improved. The presentation is more forward – it's still pleasantly even, but it now really throws itself into rhythms with confidence. Dynamics, too, are more insightful and expressive.

The expected drop in sound quality from CD to Spotify stream has no effect on the D-M41DAB's sonic mastery. The combination of low-end stability and dynamic sensibilities leaves us with a remarkably human performance for a micro system at this price.

The D-M41DAB doesn't quite put its predecessor the D-M40DAB to shame, but it certainly puts it in the shade. There are multiple marked improvements across the board, combining to offer a



WHAT HI-FI?

BEST MICRO SYSTEM

Bluetooth is in for USB, but the real headline is a quite remarkable upturn in performance

character of performance that could hold its own against groups of separates at greater cost.

Denon could have simply added Bluetooth to its system and struck the only item from our "against" column. But we're pleased it didn't. You can always improve the D-M41DAB even further by upgrading your speakers, of course, but the Denon micro system as a whole is quite the accomplishment. There's just nothing else to rival it at this price.

■ Bluesound Powernode 2i £799

Bluesound may not have won a multi-room Award for its Generation 2i as a whole, but the system is peppered with some truly brilliant products. The Powernode 2i is one of them.

It's effectively the finest just-add-speakers hi-fi system available for less than a grand. The improvements made to the 2i include a 32-bit/192kHz DAC and 60W HybridDigital amplification system, but at first it's difficult to understand how the sonic differences can be so pronounced between this year's model and its predecessor.

Trickle-down technology

In fact, the gains appear to be based mainly around trickle-down high-end circuit board design from the NAD Masters M50.2 BluOS network streamer, and a smaller wi-fi chipset, with Bluesound's engineers optimising the layout and isolation from there.

The Powernode 2i has two Toslink 3.5mm optical/analogue inputs, along with its USB, stereo speaker and subwoofer outputs. The understated

rectangular design, despite being four years old, still looks effortlessly fresh.

What looking at its chassis doesn't reveal is the inclusion of Apple AirPlay 2 and Alexa Voice Control support as well as two-way aptX HD Bluetooth, facilitating the Powernode 2i's use with a pair of wireless headphones.

The Powernode 2i combines Bluesound's expected – yet still impressive – open soundstage and full-bodied presentation with even more detail eked out. It's a bold yet insightful performance, ripe for analysis but willing also just to be enjoyed unthinkingly.

What impresses us most is its tight grasp of timing and dynamics, adroitly picking out patterns and using the space in its presentation to let them breathe without becoming untethered in the overall composition.

There is added punch and authority too, tempered well when extra subtlety is required, which makes for an even more confident and entertaining performance. Dynamics are equally bold, contouring swells and stabbing at those



WHAT HI-FI?

BEST HI-FI SYSTEM UNDER £1000

High-end circuit design has made the Powernode 2i a staggeringly good hi-fi system

more immediate shifts for levels of expression we didn't think were possible from a system at this level.

You'd need a four-figure budget for a streamer and amp combination before it could come close to bettering the Powernode 2i's performance. It refuses to compromise in any area – an admirable quality for an affordable system, and is wholly deserving of its plaudits.

■ Naim Uniti Atom £1799

Rarely does a product look and sound as good as the Uniti Atom. No wonder, then, Naim is picking up its second Award to mark its excellence.

The Atom is truly a triumph of design. From the immeasurably pleasing coffee-coaster volume dial on the roof to its full-colour LCD front panel display and superb build quality, Naim has nailed the crossover between lifestyle product and premium hi-fi.

You may see this unit being described as a streamer, but to do so is to do it something of a disservice. In effect it's a system, to which you need only attach a suitably talented pair of speakers.

It consists of 40W of Class A/B amplification (derived from the Nait integrated amps), and around the back are speaker terminals, ethernet and USB inputs, a single digital coaxial and a pair of digital optical sockets, and two analogue connections.

One is an input with switchable sensitivity (1, 2.5 or 6v) and the other an output in case you feel like adding a power amp. For £100 Naim will add an HDMI input, which should give your TV sound a significant shot in the arm.

Beyond those physical connections, the Naim has Google Chromecast, Spotify Connect, Tidal and internet radio on board, with further wireless enjoyment available via AirPlay and aptX HD Bluetooth. It's all controlled via the sensibly laid-out remote control or equally logical Naim control app.

Open the door

Once up and running, the Atom is an absolute treat to listen to, no matter what the source or material. Balanced, dynamic and expressively detailed, it combines just the right level of attack with an open and even-handed attention to the entirety of the frequency range.

The Atom is like opening a door and now listening to the music from inside the room. There's a level of detailed expression here that rivals can easily miss, mistaking nonchalantly casual delivery for pedestrian boredom. And to say it sounds lean does not mean the Uniti Atom is lacking weight; it just doesn't carry any fat.

Timing was a forte of the last generation of Naim's all-in-ones, so we're pleased to find none of it sacrificed this



The Atom is armed to the teeth, though Naim also offers an HDMI input for £100

WHAT HI-FI?
BEST HI-FI SYSTEM
OVER £1000

time around. Play Sergei Rachmaninov's *Piano Concerto No1 in F-Sharp Minor* and the Naim is entirely unfazed by the scale of the recording, the speed or intensity at which the pianist's fingers are working, or organising an orchestra around him.

Whether you're listening to some club-worthy beats or a full-scale symphony orchestra, the Naim has the poise and authority to make the most of it. It's no wonder the Uniti Atom has held on to its crown for yet another year.

■ Pro-Ject Juke Box E £369

When we first laid our eyes on Pro-Ject's Juke Box E, we thought: "We haven't seen a music centre in years." This isn't a music centre like the ones from the old days, of course. This Juke Box E is a turntable system that's entirely updated for 21st-century needs, though still evoking that retro vibe.

Based on Pro-Ject's highly-regarded Primary turntable, the Juke Box E is tricked out with an Ortofon OM 5E cartridge, amplification (25W per channel into 8 ohms) and Bluetooth receiver. At the back of the deck you'll find stereo RCA outputs at line level and pre-amp/phono level, plus a stereo RCA line-level input.

There are also left/right speaker outputs, an aerial socket for the Bluetooth receiver, and a remote control. Just strap on a pair of speakers and you're good to go.

Right from the off, this is recognisably a Pro-Ject turntable – it carries the brand's sonic signature as surely as some sports brands carry three stripes. In essence, that signature is one of

easy-going fidelity: the Juke Box E establishes a decently spacious soundstage and positions instruments upon it securely in their own space even as they integrate and interact together.

An endearing character

Tonally, it's on the warmish side of neutral, which is what we've learned to expect from turntables costing less than silly money, but its overall character is immediately endearing.

It's untroubled by even tricky tempos or idiosyncratic rhythms, it has a suitable richness and shine at the top end of the register and its midrange reproduction is detailed enough to render vocals effusive and emotive.

Match it with the appropriate speakers (and pay extra attention to the sensitivity) and the Juke Box E will show off its rhythmic prowess and low-end weight with aplomb.

In essence, the Pro-Ject Juke Box E is something of a rarity. It's an all-in-one system that demands very few compromises, given its price. It's also an



Combining old with new, the Juke Box E is a turntable product for the times

WHAT HI-FI?
BEST TURNTABLE
SYSTEM

all-in-one system that we can't easily argue against in favour of separates. This level of functionality is difficult in the extreme to replicate using individual components at this sort of money.

Plus it's extremely convenient. Mix that ease of use with a fantastic sonic performance and you have a terrific turntable product for the times.

INNOVATION OF THE YEAR

In 2018, the BBC did more than anyone to make 4K TV broadcasting available to all

WHAT HI-FI?
INNOVATION AWARDS



PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

■ BBC iPlayer 4K live streaming

Though 4K TVs may have been around as long as internet memes, live 4K broadcasts are still comparatively novel. While UK pay-TV providers - Sky, BT and Eurosport - have been in the game for a few years, broadcasting Premier League matches, MotoGP, Formula 1, Aviva Premiership rugby and tennis between them via satellite, this year marks the first time the BBC has offered live free-to-air content in 4K and HLG HDR.

Following its iPlayer-hosted *Planet Earth II* and *Blue Planet II* on-demand trials in 2016 and 2017, the BBC has live streamed the FA Cup final, a rugby league fixture, the 2018 Wimbledon tennis and the FIFA World Cup on its iPlayer platform. It also worked with Sky to broadcast the Royal Wedding in 4K.

These were all trials. As Phil Layton (head of broadcast and connected systems in BBC's R&D) is keen to stress, it's still a learning process. "We're still learning about UHD production and how you make good HDR pictures. Each event has different workflows," he says.

But the overall success of the trials, and the future it promises for 4K content for licence payers, is a giant step forward. In the lead up to the World Cup, the BBC promised 'tens of thousands' of viewers would be able to access each UHD stream on a first-come, first-served basis - and it delivered. According to the BBC, the peak audience was 60,300 on 7th July, for the Sweden v England quarter-final and day six of Wimbledon combined.

The BBC also worked on improving some of the issues that were flagged up during the trial, leading to an improved performance. By the tournament's end, latency was reduced by 20 seconds, for example, lowering the risk of hearing a goal scored on your neighbour's TV before it appeared on yours.

A permanent service is not yet guaranteed for the future, but the success and appetite for the programming offered by BBC this year can only help make it more likely. "The big events will drive this. The workflows and technology only get worked out on

The BBC has taken big steps forward in 2018 with its 4K trial broadcasts

big events. You have to do it for real. We've taken big steps forward in workflows this year, but we have to keep doing it," says Layton.

The BBC also revealed it will run some High Frame Rate trials, at 120 frames per second (Wimbledon streams were 50fps). And those hoping to fill the surround channels of their speaker package may also soon be in luck.

"Most of the sound issues were not at our end, they were with the receivers," says Layton. "But we didn't have time to work through them with receiver manufacturers. We'd like to be offering 5.1, we'd like to be thinking about next-gen audio, and using some complex functionality in people's televisions, which is all part of delivering the service," he adds.

More than a decent start, it feels now as if the journey toward 4K HDR live streaming - as well as the potential for 5.1 surround sound - is gathering real pace. For that, BBC undoubtedly deserves this year's Award for innovation.

MULTI-ROOM SYSTEMS

The good-news story here is of a flourishing sector that just continues to get better

WHAT HI-FI?
BEST MULTI-ROOM SYSTEM UNDER £1000


View offers: whf.cm/BestMultiroom2018

■ Audio Pro £650

(Addon C3 £250; Addon C10 £300; Link £100)

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

Swedish speaker manufacturer Audio Pro has thrown a spanner in the works. It has taken its business philosophy of creating the best-possible sound for the best-possible price and set up camp in the middle of multi-room land, where it has ruffled the feathers of that realm's other residents.

The company has a six-strong line-up of multi-room speakers (along with a handful of Bluetooth products which can be incorporated), but the triumvirate we've selected for this system comprises the Addon C3 speaker, its larger (and even more sonically talented) sibling the Addon C10 and the Link 1 – a system hub that connects existing hi-fi components or wireless speakers into the chain.

The C3 and C10 create a pair of smart, appealing boom-box-style speakers with a familiar driver configuration – the 'koala bear' design that has become these speakers' distinguishing feature. The difference in cabinet size is reflected in the Addon C10's larger mid/bass driver – 13cm in diameter, compared with the

Addon C3's 9cm. The C10 also has a larger reflex port and an 80W digital class D amplifier, double that of its sibling, so it can delve an extra 5Hz into those bass frequencies.

Both house a large, circular volume control flanked by sets of four smaller buttons on the top: for power-on, play/pause, input selection and Bluetooth pairing to the left, and presets to its right, plus an aux-in jack.

The distribution hub

The disc-shaped Link 1's job is to collect song selections from the app, connect to your home network via either wi-fi or its ethernet input and dispense the music via whichever output you have selected. With the 3.5mm-to-RCA cable included, connecting to pretty much any existing set up could hardly be easier.

The Audio Pro app seeks out all available products connected to the home network and allows access to Amazon's Alexa voice assistant. It can be a little buggy – the odd stutter and hang

Fuss-free set-up counts for a lot, but the real draw here is the clear, powerful sound

– and is limited compared with most rival systems, not least because you can't use it for Spotify or Apple Music.

The great draw here is the musicality of these speakers' performance. Its unrivalled by anything at a similar price – or even quite a lot more. The Addon C3's level of detail, for example, cleanly exposes the texture and timbre of each instrument and vocal line alike without underplaying cohesion or organisation. It also times with metronomic precision.

Add the increased heft of the Addon C10 and the performance is predictably grander, able to rattle trinkets from the mantelpiece or twist our insides with its low-end authority. There's also more space and detail to the presentation.

The Link 1 perhaps shoulders a lesser burden in what is effectively a midwife role, but it performs its own specific task with equal aplomb.

For sound quality at the price, this system is simply unbeatable. And that's more than enough to earn Audio Pro a fourth *What Hi-Fi?* Award this year.

WHAT HI-FI?**BEST MULTI-ROOM
SYSTEM OVER £1000****■ Sonos £1047**

(One £199; Play:5 £499;
Connect £349)

For years, Sonos has been synonymous with the concept of multi-room audio, so it's almost hard to know which came first. At the very least, Sonos spotted a trend long before its competitors – at most, it's responsible for making the market what it is today.

And the company continues to innovate, maintaining a presence in other sectors of the audio market with products such as the Playbar, Playbase and the new Beam soundbar – all of which can be brought in to a multi-room system – as well as integrating Alexa Voice Control with products such as the Sonos One to make it, for our money, the finest premium multi-room system on the market.

As long as your wireless network is strong enough to reach all the rooms that might contain speakers, you won't need the £99 Sonos Boost, but we'd still recommend hardwiring a master speaker if possible, as it's the only way to take advantage of the peer-to-peer 'mesh' network that makes Sonos so reliable.

The Sonos app is a large part of the system's charm. As well as walking you through the set-up, it's where control of your system takes place, enabling you to see what music is playing where, group speakers together and so on.

It also offers, by quite a margin, the widest choice of streaming-service compatibility of any multi-room system, giving you access to all of your music in one place. Even Spotify is properly integrated into the app, where most rivals force you to use Spotify Connect.

There may be no hi-res support, but Sonos accommodates all the main file formats, including MP3, WMA, FLAC (up to 16-bit/44.1kHz), WAV, AAC and AIFF.

Sonic consistency

When it comes to performance, each member of the Sonos family offers the same entertaining character.

We've chosen the One for our sample system because it's the most impressive unit in its class. It can't quite match the Audio Pro C5 for outright sound quality,

Despite its status as multi-room king Sonos continues to innovate to great effect

but coming in at £30 cheaper and bundling in Alexa voice control largely makes up for that. It also produces a full-bodied and spacious sound that's capable of going surprisingly loud.

That general sonic character also carries over to the far larger Play:5, but it's able to produce a far bigger and bolder sound. It can easily fill a room without sacrificing the clarity or openness of the midrange. It's effortlessly listenable, with no hard or sharp edges to cause distraction.

The Sonos component that allows you to integrate your existing hi-fi into the multi-room system is called the Connect, which again offers an engaging listen that'll do even an upper-mid-range system justice.

The absence of hi-res support is a shame, but we don't see it as a deal breaker. For us, great sound quality, the most substantial selection of streaming services and the most pleasant user-experience make Sonos the best top-end multi-room option.

ACCESSORIES

When looking to upgrade, these handy extras can give your hi-fi system a cost-effective boost

View offers: whf.cm/BestAccessories2018

■ AudioQuest Rocket 11 £12.50/m

AudioQuest is back with a tremendous speaker cable which claims top spot as our Product of the Year for accessories, knocking previous winner Chord Clearway off its perch.

What appeals to us is how flexible the Rocket 11 is. Even more so than rival cables, it's easy to bend around those tricky tight corners to reach your kit, without worrying that you'll break or damage the cabling.

AudioQuest has taken care with the configuration and quality of the conductors used inside the Rocket 11 cables, too. It uses semi-solid true-concentric conductors and long-grain copper to improve performance and reduce any interference that might degrade the sound.

Thoughtful touches such as marking the left and right cables, labelling which end goes into the amplifier and which end plugs into the speaker, and designing it so that you can use the cables in a single-wired or bi-wired configuration if your system demands it, all add up to make the Rocket 11 all the more easy and appealing to use.

Of course, none of these crowd-pleasing notes would make a jot of difference if the Rocket 11 cable didn't have a positive impact on your system's

performance. Happily, that's not the case. The best thing this AudioQuest cable does is get out of the way and simply let you enjoy the music.

Whatever song you play, our system sounds sparkling clear, incredibly detailed and is propelled by the kind of rhythm that keeps you toe-tapping all the way through an album. Leading edges of notes are stunningly crisp and clean, and vocals are packed with nuance and emotion.

The Rocket 11 guides our reference system into performing with a pleasing and punchy sense of dynamism that's a joy to listen to. Compared with the Chord Clearway cable it has eclipsed, the Rocket 11 helps our system knit musical

WHAT HI-FI?
BEST SPEAKER CABLE

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR



elements together with that bit more confidence and alacrity. The sense of space is bigger and more apparent, too.

At £12.50 per metre (before termination), the AudioQuest Rocket 11 is a touch on the pricey side. The costs begin to add up when you take into account how many cables and the length you'll need, but if you're spending hard-earned cash on your hi-fi components, you'll want cabling that doesn't inhibit their performance.

The Rocket 11 speaker cable is an ideal way to let your hi-fi reach its full potential. If you want to inject a new lease of life into your system, these impressive cables are worth investing in.

To release your hi-fi's potential, these cables are worth investing in

■ Chord Company C-line £40/m

For anyone looking to give their hi-fi system a sonic lift that won't cost the Earth, Chord's entry-level C-line interconnect remains a no-brainer.

It features Chord's Tuned ARAY technology, which previously had only been included in products aimed at the more high-end hi-fi customer. But its increased transparency was so favoured that Chord trickled it down across its ranges to the more entry-level options.

Add in features such as high-grade copper conductors and high density foil shielding, and you have a cable that is well equipped to make your hi-fi system shine that bit brighter and truer.

But what difference can a metre or so of cable really make to your overall

system? The C-line's true forte is the way it allows us to hear the real musicality in a piece, allowing the system to knit it all together seamlessly.

As is its signature, Chord has created a product that doesn't ignore things like the size of the soundstage and detail within, but places its main emphasis on the character of your music.

Play any song from your music library, and you'll find a stronger rhythmic drive and more expressive dynamics when the C-line is connected to your hi-fi equipment than when it is just using the out-of-the-box cables.

Instead of spending £40 on a smart gadget, spend it on this C-line - your hi-fi system will thank you.

WHAT HI-FI?
BEST ANALOGUE INTERCONNECT UNDER £50



■ Chord Company Clearway £90/m



WHAT HI-FI?

BEST ANALOGUE INTERCONNECT OVER £50

Chord displays an understanding of what makes hi-fi great, with an interconnect that never loses sight of your system's musicality.

Performance is truer when using the Clearway - a little like everything has been cleaned. Compared to the C-line, there's extra analytical insight and improvements in terms of dynamics and organisation. The precision of the sound coming from our reference system with the Clearway plugged in is significant. Timing is immaculate and there's more space to breathe.

Yes, £90 is quite a lot to cough up for a metre of cable, but for those who can afford the outlay, and who have a system to justify it, the Clearway is brilliantly capable of letting you hear where your money has gone.

■ Atacama Moseco 6 £120



WHAT HI-FI?

BEST SPEAKER STANDS

"These Moseco 6s might just be our new favourite affordable speaker stands." That's what we said when we first reviewed them in 2014, and four years on, that sentiment still stands.

The Mosecos are a classy pair of stands thanks to the neat, minimal design. The two metal columns - one filled for better stability, one for cable management - and the bamboo base ensure a rigid build and sturdy support, too.

These Atacamas allow our system to flourish by letting the speakers deliver their best in terms of punch, detail and rhythm. We're impressed with how weighty and dynamic these stands make our system sound.

For a relatively modest £120, they will bring out the full potential of your stereo speakers.

■ Atacama Evoque Eco 60-40 SE £540



WHAT HI-FI?

BEST EQUIPMENT RACK

If you're of the opinion all hi-fi racks are created more or less equal, the Atacama Evoque Eco 60-40 Special Edition will make you rethink.

The original Evoque 60-40 rack took the Award trophy in 2014, but Atacama soon followed it with a 'Special Edition' version - and such was the improvement that it's been our preferred equipment rack ever since.

We find our system delivering crisper detail and a tighter and more composed low end when placed on the Atacama. Build quality is impeccable, and the modular design means you can create your bespoke rack to suit your needs.

It's a considerable investment, but the effect a decent rack can have on your system is worth it. And this Atacama comes highly recommended.

■ Rega Fono MM MK3 £199



WHAT HI-FI?

BEST PHONO STAGE UNDER £250

Making it two Award wins in a row, the Rega Fono MM MK3, the third generation of this phono amp for moving magnet cartridges, is virtually flawless.

The Fono MM MK3 cuts a sleeker figure over its previous iteration, but the genius in its simplicity remains. Modifications are minimal inside, with Rega making only minor tweaks to the board in order to reduce noise levels.

Recordings are dealt with that trademark Rega punch and enthusiasm, showing off a fine sense of rhythm and the confidence to be precise, yet refusing to be too regimental about the music. The Rega lets dynamics drive the percussion as much as having a firm grip on timing, and that helps give it a class-leading performance.

■ Arcam rPhono £399



WHAT HI-FI?

BEST PHONO STAGE OVER £250

Few rivals can compete with the Arcam rPhono's combination of insight and entertainment. And so this £400 phono stage holds on to its Award trophy for another year.

We pair the understated, aluminium-cased rPhono with appropriate kit, and are impressed by its refined yet full-bodied and powerful sound. There's plenty of detail here, and the skill to organise it properly. It delivers an agile sense of rhythm and bags of punch. A subtle, revealing midrange and a surprising level of transparency show just how capable this phono stage is.

This is a hugely accomplished box, and the sonic character remains the same whether you're using the moving magnet or moving coil circuit. It's the best of its kind at this price.

■ Goldring E3 £90



WHAT HI-FI?

BEST CARTRIDGE

An Award for a cartridge? In the era of streaming? This isn't the 1970s. But the vinyl revival means cartridges are back on the menu and the Goldring E3 is a superbly realised moving-magnet cartridge that will work well with the majority of affordable turntables.

Available in a fetching shade of violet, the Goldring is an impressively rounded performer. The E3 has a decent serving of attack and a surefooted way with rhythms. A high level of refinement keeps even aggressive recordings listenable. The sound it delivers is clear, informative and still fun.

We can't ask much more than that at this level. If you want to bring your mid-priced deck up to date, fitting it with the E3 is a fine idea.

Worldmags.net

Smart in Every Sense

“Alexa, play The Rolling Stones on my iStream 3”



amazon music



TIDAL



Revival iStream 3

robertsradio.com/revival-istream3



ROBERTS

#smartineverysense



TELEVISIONS

Intense competition between brands means there are plenty of superb TVs around

WHAT HI·FI?
BEST 55IN TV



**PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR**

View offers: whf.cm/BestTelevisions2018

■ LG OLED55C8PLA £2000

At 55in, things get really tasty - this is where manufacturers get super-serious and it's the smallest size in which you can buy an OLED. It's also an extremely popular size with buyers looking for something really special - so step forward the LG OLED55C8PLA.

Needless to say, the competition between brands at this size is incredibly intense. We've seen 55in OLEDs from Philips, Sony and Panasonic (all derived from the same LG panel), and Samsung this year made its strongest case yet for QLED as a viable alternative.

LG's answer to that extraordinary line-up of rivals was risky: rather than make massive upgrades to the panel, it instead decided to focus on the brain that drives it. The Alpha 9 processor brings with it a number of changes that are individually quite subtle but collectively amount to a meaningful step forward. And let's remember, LG was already at the top of the TV game, with the OLED55B7V having been crowned our TV Product of the Year last year.

The OLED55C8PLA takes that awesome benchmark and adds even greater sharpness, detail and punch. Play the opening of *Planet Earth II* on 4K Blu-ray and the selection of clips from the episodes to come provides evidence of a supremely capable, consistent and natural performer. The snow of the mountains is purer and brighter than it was on last year's sets, and there's more bright detail, too, as evidenced by the distinct, fluffy, three-dimensional clouds. The sun-baked side of a ridge of dunes is a gloriously rich, burnished orange, the seemingly endless canopy of a rainforest is lusciously, vividly green, and the ocean surrounding a tropical island combines beautiful, enticing aquamarine around the shore with steadily, subtly deepening shades of blue as your eye moves out to the open ocean.

This is an HDR10 disc, but the LG also supports the dynamic metadata-toting Dolby Vision format that, in the vast majority of cases, brings with it even greater contrast and colours.

The only TV that can match the C8 is its more expensive sibling

The TV that mounted the strongest challenge against the C8 was Samsung's QE55Q9FN, which boasts even greater punch and vibrancy. The C8 counters with typically deep OLED blacks, and greater consistency to its colours and contrast. Everything you watch on this LG looks natural and authentic to an extent that no current rival can match.

The C8 also boasts one of the best operating systems out there in webOS 3.5. Not only is it slick, colourful and intuitive, it houses practically every streaming app you're likely to need including, of course, Netflix - complete with Dolby Vision support.

The only other 55in TV that can match the C8 is its sibling, the E8 - and that's because it has the same panel and processing. The biggest difference is that the E8 is sonically superior. It doesn't sound better than a good soundbar, though, so we'd recommend buying the C8 and using the change to add a seriously good sound solution to the seriously great picture.

Philips 50PUS6703 £479

We hold our hands up: we were unable this year to find a small TV worthy of an Award. Not only are manufacturers more resistant to supplying them for review, those models we have had in our test rooms have invariably disappointed.

But instead of a small TV to recommend, we have got an affordable TV that's worth shouting about. The Philips 50PUS6703 grabs the attention with its specs. For £479 (a hefty reduction on the launch price of £599) you not only get a 50in screen with a 4K resolution and HDR, but also Philips' Ambilight tech, with strips of LEDs built into the edges of the set to extend the onscreen image onto the surrounding wall in the form of coloured light. It's spectacular in action and even makes the screen seem bigger than it really is.

But, such is the quality of the picture you get for your money, the 50PUS6703 would be an Award-winner without the Ambilight. At the affordable end of the TV spectrum, HDR is often promised but rarely delivered. This Philips bucks that trend by reproducing HDR content with the sort of punch and pop you'd expect of a much more premium set.

We play *Kingsman: The Golden Circle* on 4K Blu-ray and the Philips delivers the glowing yellow and red neon signs adorning an amphitheatre in a striking but nuanced style. This TV walks the fine line of boldness and subtlety, making it an excellent handler of skin-tones. Against a bright white padded cell, Harry Hart's (Colin Firth) puffy complexion looks natural and well handled.

Detail and sharpness are superb at this resolution, but the Philips does a great job as you move down from 1080p to 720p and even standard-def. The latter looks worse here than on a premium set, but this is a perfectly watchable and relatively clean picture given the price.

Even Philips' decision to prioritise black depth over dark detail seems sensible. Of course we'd like both, but forced to make a choice we'd take the extra depth and the knock-on benefits to contrast, colours and dynamism.

The 50PUS6703 sounds decent by affordable flatscreen standards, delivering a clear and authoritative soundstage. We'd recommend adding a soundbar, of course, but if that's not possible the Philips will do the job.



This 50in 4K Philips TV is one of the bargains of the year

WHAT HI-FI?

BEST 49-50IN TV UNDER £500

Our only criticisms are that the operating system is rather rudimentary and that getting the TV performing its best is tricky. However, those relatively minor flaws don't prevent us from proclaiming the 50PUS6703 one of the biggest bargains of the year.

Sony KD-49XF9005 £1049

For a product as modern as a 4K HDR television, the Sony KD-49XF9005 has a strong legacy. It's the sequel to last year's Award-winning KD-49XE9005 and the smaller sibling of the KD-65XF9005, which also takes an Award this year.

This Sony justifies a price tag more than double that of the Philips with premium features, including Sony's former top-of-the-range X1 Extreme processor and, more crucially, a direct LED backlight with zonal dimming.

When implemented properly, as it is here, the benefit of such a backlight is extended contrast and, sure enough, the XF9005 delivers a dazzling combination of deep blacks and bright whites and colours. Play *Guardians Of The Galaxy Vol.2* on 4K Blu-ray and the golden Anulax batteries look truly alien in the way they shine against the pitch blackness of space. The reflected light on Starlord's face is natural, with nuance between the left and right sides.

Colours are fantastic all-round, too. As Ego and Meredith Quill drive through 1980s Missouri, the farmland is rich and

earthy, contrasting nicely with the range of green hues of the grass and the bright - but not unnaturally vivid - blue sky. In a close-up, the streaks in Ego's hair are warm and organic, and there's subtler layering of colour in Quill's blonde locks than there is from last year's XE9005.

The KD-49XF9005 is more detailed than its predecessor, too - Starlord's moustache is thicker and bushier than when viewed on the older set.

While HDR content shows the XF9005 at its best, it's a serious all-rounder that makes the most of whatever you watch. Non-HDR content benefits from Sony's natural colour balance, 1080p is sharp and detailed, and standard-def is impressively clean. Motion is sharpened and smoothed without the addition of the dreaded soap opera effect.

The TV's design is fairly subtle and sophisticated, and while we're not overly enamoured with the splayed feet, it does leave enough space for a soundbar. Not that the XF9005 sounds bad - audio is clear and dynamic - but a dedicated sound system will sound better.



This is a superb all-round TV that does everything and does it well

WHAT HI-FI?

BEST 49-50IN TV OVER £500

The Android TV operating system comes with a whole load of apps, from Netflix and Amazon in 4K HDR, to Google Play Movies & TV and BBC iPlayer. It adds up to an all-rounder of a telly that does everything brilliantly. If you're looking for the best TV around 50in available right now, this is it.

■ Sony KD-65XF9005 £1800

Life in the midrange is tough – too expensive to be considered a bargain and too cheap for all the flagship bells and whistles, it's hard to generate much excitement about a midrange TV.

But there are rare occasions when the midrange throws up something rather special – a television that combines some of the best features of the top-end with a price that's affordable to more people.

Like its Award-winning 49in sibling, the KD-65XF9005 combines a direct LED backlight with Sony's fancy X1 Extreme processor to excellent effect. The opening ten minutes of *Guardians Of The Galaxy Vol.2* provides a stern and complete workout for TVs – and one the Sony passes with flying colours.

The first thing you notice is the clouds. Viewed on this Sony, the sky is so dramatic and pretty it's impossible to resist. This highlights one of the XF9005's greatest strengths, its white performance.

Not only does the TV go brighter than similarly priced rivals, its bright whites are packed with detail and nuance.

There's texture and definition here that can't be matched for this money, and the

result is a fluffy cloud-packed sky that seems to stretch forever.

The yellow lettering that places the opening scene in 1980s Missouri pops from the screen in vivid fashion, and there's an enticing lushness and vibrancy to the scene. But perhaps most impressive is that this exuberance combines with genuine subtlety and realism. Skin tones are exceptional: warm and vivacious but also realistic.

Motion processing has long been a company forte, and the XF9005 continues the good work. It delivers slow pans and fast action with crisp edges and no discernible judder – and without having to introduce the dreaded, unnatural soap-opera effect.

Last, but by no means least, on the list of the XF9005's strengths is its black performance. Some TVs exaggerate their blacks, which can result in a strong, dynamic picture at the expense of some subtlety, but the Sony is nuanced, delineating darker shades rather than delivering a dollop of pure black.

The only real criticisms we have concerning the Sony's picture quality are of its viewing angles and occasional



The TV's white performance is one of its greatest strengths

WHAT HI-FI?

BEST 65IN TV UNDER £2500

blooming from the backlight. Neither is a huge concern, particularly at this price, but are worth a mention.

If you can live with those slight blemishes to an otherwise stunning performance, the Sony KD-65XF9005 is a superb buy.

■ LG OLED65C8PLA £3000

You might assume that a great TV at one size would automatically be great at another. Such assumptions are dangerous, though, and over the years we've regularly been disappointed by the bigger or smaller siblings of five-star sets.

So, even after its 55in sibling received a five-star review from us, we didn't assume the OLED65C8PLA would be good. But we got it into our test room, carefully calibrated it and pitted it against the best TVs available at its size. And guess what? It's amazing – just like a bigger version of its 55in sibling.

The OLED65C8PLA is also powered by LG's new Alpha 9 processor, which brings with it a number of picture enhancements, including a four-part noise-reduction system, frequency-based image sharpening, object-based contrast enhancement and adaptive colour mapping.

To get the ball rolling, we start with the 4K Blu-ray of *Despicable Me*. The picture bursts bright with colour as the pristine blue sky clashes with the yellow sun-kissed sand in the opening scene.

There's a jaw-dropping level of clarity and detail as you move inside Vector's fortress. The punchy bright whites of the walls and the searing orange hue of Vector's tracksuit all make an impact, but the TV falls short of burning your retinas.

Small details like the denim texture on the Minions' dungarees and the silver zipper on Gru's jacket are all superbly rendered with no soft edges.

Switch to *The Last Jedi* on 4K Blu-ray and the LG shows it's equally at home with darker, more testing moments. As you'd expect from an OLED panel, the galaxy looks suitably black and inky as the Resistance evacuates D'Qar during the opening chapter. Viewing angles are excellent, with little loss of brightness or contrast, even if you've been banished to the far side of your L-shaped sofa.

It's easy to forget how much work a 4K TV has to do to upscale a standard Blu-ray, or HDTV picture, and the LG should be applauded for its efforts. Faced with the 1080p Blu-ray of *Fantastic Beasts And Where To Find Them*, the stability and insight are commendable.



This 65in LG follows in the footsteps of its five-star sibling

WHAT HI-FI?

BEST 65IN TV OVER £2500

For a flatscreen TV, the C8 sounds decent, with clear, expressive dialogue and reasonable weight and substance to more explosive scenes. There aren't many premium 2018 TVs that can match this level of performance at this size and for this kind of money. This is yet another LG OLED that ticks all the boxes.

SOUNDBARS AND SOUNDBASES

With soundbars and bases, there's no need to suffer thin television sound in silence

WHAT HI*FI?

**BEST SOUNDBAR
£300-£500**



**PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR**

View offers: whf.cm/BestSoundbars2018

Sonos Beam £399

You can't accuse Sonos of resting on its laurels. Despite having made a name for itself with its wireless and multi-room achievements, and early speakers such as the Play:3 and Play:5, it soon pressed on into soundbar territory with its critically acclaimed Playbar.

Skip four years to 2018 and now we have the Beam, which once again ups the ante for Sonos's rivals. The Beam is a smaller (65cm wide), cheaper TV speaker, with a few additions to its spec sheet, including an HDMI connection and voice-control assistants Amazon Alexa and Apple Siri. Sonos is looking to add Google Assistant soon too.

Touch controls on top of the soundbar allow you to select volume up/down, play/pause and microphone mute, while an LED indicates the soundbar's status and voice feedback. Around the back you'll find the HDMI connection, ethernet port and a pairing button.

Available in black and white finishes, the Beam looks stylish but understated. Inside are four full-range drivers, one

tweeter and three passive radiators, plus five class-D amplifiers. The drivers and radiators are positioned along the front and the far edges of the bar, helping to drive sound around your room for a more immersive, room-filling sound.

The Beam is best described as a typical Sonos product, which is high praise indeed. But the fact it has the edge over its Playbar and Playbase siblings has earned it Product of the Year status.

On the source

This isn't simply a soundbar: it's also a wireless, multi-room speaker that can play music from almost any source. Spotify, Tidal, Apple Music, Amazon, Google Play, Deezer, your phone, network-connected hard drives - it's all supported and all can be combined in on-the-fly playlists and queues.

The Beam can talk to any other Sonos products you have and, thanks to AirPlay 2, it can also link with products from other manufacturers. This compatibility means you can add Sonos speakers to

The Beam is a typical Sonos product - high praise indeed

form a full surround-sound system.

Sound quality is exceptionally good for its size. Sonos has managed to overcome the usual limitations of compact speakers, and given the Beam's dimensions, the width and spaciousness of the soundstage are astonishing. Play the opening of the 2017 remake of *Ghost In The Shell* and the sound effects of the gunfight fill the room in a way that confounds expectations, firing left and right and echoing much further into the room than you'd expect.

There's good height and weight to the delivery, too. A helicopter seems to arrive from above your head, and when the soundtrack becomes bass-heavy, the Beam reproduces it with authority.

Dialogue is clear and direct, and never drowned out by the rest of the action. There's a touch of brightness to the treble, particularly at higher volumes, but, for a soundbar of this size and price, it's eminently forgivable. Essentially, this is an affordable soundbar that could transform your listening experience.

■ Yamaha YAS-207 £259

Yamaha's secret weapon is called YSP (Yamaha Sound Projection), a technology designed to simulate a surround-sound experience from a soundbar, thereby offering a reasonable compromise between performance and practicality for those who don't have the space, cash or desire to adorn their living room with multiple speakers.

While others use similar technology in their soundbars, Yamaha's works particularly well. That might be down to the company's adoption of DTS's Virtual:X codec, which aims to simulate sound delivered by a 7.1.4 set-up (quick maths tells us that's 11.1 channels), not by being natively encoded on a disc's soundtrack, like DTS:X or Dolby Atmos, but via a post-processing algorithm that can be applied to old and new content alike (as long as it has a DTS codec). It allows users to enjoy height and surround sound effects with just a soundbar.

While the bar has optical and 3.5mm inputs, we choose to go through one of its HDMI sockets, which enables 4K and HDR passthrough.

Effective though YSP is, it's no miracle worker. It doesn't make soundtracks appear as if they're being blasted down

from your ceiling or from behind your sofa. But as far as 'virtual' surround-sound experiences from a single enclosure go, the YAS-207 is hugely effective, defying the bar's physical proportions. And you can always play with the seven sound modes offered through the Yamaha HT Controller app.

We play Ang Lee's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* on Ultra HD Blu-ray and during the NFL half-time show there is a sense that it's live – the crowd has a real presence, and the YAS-207 makes a big deal of the echo around the stadium.

There's plenty of space to occupy in the soundfield, and the Yamaha manages to fill it with subtle, layered detail, although not to such an extent that it forgets how to have a good time. There's plenty of dynamism and crispness to the show's musical performance, the Yamaha demonstrating tight control over the drum rolls and punch to the cymbals.

Its talent is confirmed when playing the tight rhythms and multi-element soundscapes of Frank Ocean's *Provider* via Bluetooth. This soundbar is as adept with music as it is movies.

The bar is only 6cm high, so most TV screens should easily clear that, and it's



WHAT HI-FI?
BEST SOUNDBAR
UNDER £300

This Yamaha is a natural entertainer especially at such a modest price

inconspicuous in its design too. It's a black bar with a few indicative lights to show source and surround type selection. They can be turned off via the basic-but-easy-to-use remote control. The external subwoofer is a lot less inconspicuous, but it's reasonably slim.

The YAS-207 is a natural entertainer, and the fact that it excels in such a crowded marketplace at such a modest price makes it all the more worthy. In the cause of propagating quality hi-fi, that fact should not be kept secret.

■ Dali Kubik One £799

Quite frankly, we've lost count of the number of times the Dali Kubik One has featured in our annual Awards issue. Like online feedback forms, it has become something of a regular fixture – but much more welcome.

It's not as though there's no talented competition; the Sonos Playbar and Yamaha's YSP-2700 are both snapping at the Dali's heels, but this stylish soundbar still does enough to keep them at bay.

The Kubik One has an impressive skill set: a vibrant and engaging sound, ample features and gorgeous looks. And appropriately enough, the former is the Dali's strongest hand. Whether you're watching *Guardians Of The Galaxy* or Kraftwerk's latest concert Blu-ray, the sounds populating the soundtracks ping around with precision and clarity.

It's a wide, spacious soundstage, giving jets and spaceships ample room to manoeuvre, while the techno machine men's robotic synths punch through the beats with intensity. Voices are detailed, maintaining their textures and never

sounding harsh, while there's enough heft in the lower register to produce a warm, corpulent sound. There's no Dolby Atmos here, but the Kubik One still offers one of the most involving experiences we've heard from a soundbar.

It's big though. At 16cm tall, it will obscure the bottom of some TV screens and might justify its own shelf. If that's not a problem, nothing else in its design will put you off. Soundbars don't tend to be attractive, but the bright grille, which comes in nine colours, wrapped around the solid, hefty aluminium chassis makes this an exception.

There are two optical inputs and one RCA, plus a micro USB socket that lets you hardwire a Mac or PC to play hi-res tracks (up to 24-bit/96kHz) stored on there. aptX Bluetooth expands versatility to wireless playback and a sub-out socket lets you hook up your own subwoofer – not that we think you'll need to; the Dali emits deep, weighty low frequencies and there's a switch to adjust bass levels depending on where you position it.



WHAT HI-FI?
BEST SOUNDBAR
£500-£1000

Soundbars are rarely attractive, but the Kubik One is an exception

So, Dali's reign continues. The Kubik One's feature list might look meagre compared to those more modern soundbars which offer network streaming, Dolby Atmos and such like, but the most important thing here is the Kubik's performance – and for that it is still the king. And we continue to be grateful subjects.



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■ Sony HT-ST5000 £1199

Go over the £1000 mark for a soundbar and you're entitled to expect something quite special. The Sony HT-ST5000 is very special - it's not just that this relatively compact bar-and-sub combination can process Dolby Atmos, it's that it performs that task so well.

The ST5000 wasn't the first soundbar to venture into Atmos territory. Philips, Samsung and Yamaha have all tried their hand but none as successfully. The Sony manages to pair a real sense of height with a polished all-round sound quality - perfect if you're looking to benefit from the best tech on offer with the minimum of installation fuss.

The HT-ST5000 takes up less space than many comparable combos, but at 118cm wide, is still fairly hefty. Along the front of the bar are seven 65mm drivers, three of which have tweeters mounted in the middle, and on the top are two upfiring drivers. The balance between them and the subwoofer drivers can be altered in the 'Set-up' screen, and there are adjustments for ceiling height and your distance from the bar and sub, too.

You can connect through HDMI (three 4K- and HDR-supporting HDMI inputs and one HDMI output) or via its optical,

3.5mm jack and USB inputs. The Sony supports files up to 24-bit/96kHz as well as Spotify Connect, Google Chromecast and Bluetooth for streaming duties.

We dive in with *Star Trek Beyond*, which has a Dolby Atmos soundtrack, and there's a distinct sense of space and movement provided by this soundbar's drivers, both in front of you and above you. Rather than having audio sound like it's coming from above the television the HT-ST5000 pushes it overhead, so the woosh of spaceships becomes part of a more immersive soundstage.

Changing to a non-Dolby Atmos movie, *Deadpool*, the HT-ST5000 handles its dynamics well. When the 'Merc with a Mouth' takes on a team of bad guys on a motorway, the rapid changes between large-scale car crashes, and the mundane, straight-to-camera jokes, are sophisticatedly managed, ensuring that scale and emotion are both eloquently conveyed.

Volume isn't an issue either. We can turn the Sony up loud and experience no harshness in the treble or muddiness in the overall presentation. The integration between the treble, midrange and bass (both from the bar and the subwoofer) is

The Sony isn't cheap, but it does Atmos better than other soundbars

WHAT HI-FI?
BEST SOUNDBAR
OVER £1000



tight, giving the HT-ST5000 a great sense of timing and rhythm. In the low end, the bass is earthy, nicely capturing the growling depths of Lorde's *Royals*.

This Sony isn't cheap, and there are more affordable Dolby Atmos alternatives, such as the newer LG SK10Y, which comes with a subwoofer and offers clarity, detail and impressive sound projection, but it can't match the Sony for sheer drama or dynamic prowess. We'd rather pay the extra £300 for the extra benefits the Sony brings.

■ Q Acoustics M2 £299

From speakers to soundbars to this soundbase - when it comes to offering devices that boost a TV's sound you can't accuse Q Acoustics of being shy. The company's motto seems to be 'If at first you succeed, try your hand at something else'. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the M2 follows in the footsteps of its soundbar siblings the Media 4 and M3, and scores a big hit in the process.

We watch *The Neon Demon* on Blu-ray, and the M2 reveals its talents. The opening credits are not only a window into Cliff Martinez's eerie, eclectic score, but also into the Q Acoustics' pleasing tonality and power.

The downward-firing subwoofer digs deep to punch through the basslines, while the twin Balanced Mode Radiators fight hard for the credit by delivering the sparkling, purposeful synth-driven electronica. That enthusiastically musical character mirrors the kind of sound we've heard from the company's other soundbars, so that's credit to Q Acoustics for its consistency.

Once things settle to a quieter section with dialogue, we hear that vocal expression is equally impressive through the M2. There's genuine vindictiveness to the insults thrown around a room, as though the Q Acoustics is somehow relishing the aggressive dialogue.

And while there's no DSP trickery good enough to make you believe that the sound is coming from anywhere but the base, the M2 throws out a soundfield that feels more than adequate, even in the company of a 65in screen.

All that detail and punch bode well for the M2's music playback, so we play a Tidal stream of The Cure's *Six Different Ways* via Bluetooth and that aptitude is confirmed, the sparkling piano line complementing Robert Smith's vocal.

The M2 is sturdy enough to sit comfortably underneath a big screen TV, and can handle weight of up to 25kg. Round the back of the unit are two settings switches - one three-mode equaliser that toys with bass levels (depending on whether the M2 is under



The M2 offers performance, ease of use and value for money

WHAT HI-FI?
BEST SOUNDBASE

a TV or in a large or small cabinet) and a two-switch volume control. This is also where the inputs are: ARC-compatible HDMI, optical, RCA and 3.5mm inputs.

This might not be the only soundbase capable of improving a telly's sound, but others don't currently offer anything to top the M2's blend of detailed expression, ease of use and value.

SET-TOP BOXES

With hundreds of channels of on-demand and live TV, these are little boxes of magic

View offers: whf.cm/BestSetTopBoxes2018

■ Sky Q from £20pm

The Sky Q box may now be the standard box on offer to new Sky subscribers, but there's nothing standard about the Sky Q experience. Of course, you will have to pay a pretty penny for the premium content, but this remains the best way to experience live and on-demand TV in the UK, whether you're in the front room, bedroom or on the move.

To make the most out of Sky Q you need to pay for it. For starters, you will need the 2TB box (which adds £75 to the upfront cost) as this brings access to 4K Ultra HD content and allows you to go multi-room (an extra £12 per month) with the addition of Sky Q Mini boxes (they are £99 each, or £119 for two).

You also need to factor in paying for the content you want to watch. There are all sorts of bundles on offer, led by the flagship Sky Sports and Sky Cinema packages, but now also bolstered by the inclusion of Netflix and Spotify.

There's no denying that it's expensive, but Sky Q is also the best TV service available in the UK by a long way, highlighted by this particular Award. The

breadth and depth of content remains Sky's strongest selling point, but the interface and 'fluid viewing' experience, as Sky calls it, is arguably every bit as important.

Long-time rival Virgin now offers some 4K content via its V6 box, but the selection is very limited and the user experience lags well behind Sky's.

Get on board with the full Sky Q experience and you can enjoy all of the content, all of the time, wherever you are, thanks to more tuners than you will ever need and a multi-room experience that lets you access content wherever you are, in - or outside - your home.

Start watching on your lounge box and continue in the bedroom, access all of your recordings from any room of the house, and take them with you, using your phone or tablet.

The regularly updated interface is fast, good-looking, intuitive and it gets you to the content you want very quickly indeed. Sky's curated content is improving too, offering up personalised programmes and films based on your

WHAT HI*FI? BEST SUBSCRIPTION BOX



PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

It's expensive, but Sky Q is the best service for live and on-demand TV

viewing habits in an effort to keep pace with the bespoke experience offered by streaming services such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video.

The 4K content looked great at launch but now there's more of it - double the amount, says Sky - and some of it now comes with Dolby Atmos sound, too. HDR is still on the way at the time of writing, which should improve those sharp, detailed pictures even more.

The best got better in 2018, and Sky Q remains the ultimate TV service for the 21st century. As such, it once again walks away with a Product of the Year sash over its shoulder.

■ Humax FVP-5000T £199 (500GB)/£229 (1TB)

Humax is a bit like an old friend with the capacity to surprise you. The company has maintained a consistent presence in our Awards pages for years, not least by refining and refreshing its products to keep them relevant.

This year, though, it's been more a question of 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it' as the FVP-5000T once again collects the Award for Best PVR.

At its core, the FVP-5000T offers FreeviewHD+ television. That means subscription-free access to live broadcasts of all Freeview channels - including BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5 and their various subsidiaries.

Though most are in standard-def, there's a decent selection of channels in Full HD - depending on your location. Programme recording, including the 'series record' function, is achieved via an eight-day television guide. Multiple tuners mean you can record four programmes while you watch a fifth.

And if you're likely to store masses of content there are 1TB (£260) and 2TB versions as well as the 500GB one. Netflix is on-board for those with a subscription, but only up to Full HD.

The box has built-in wi-fi, but there's also an ethernet port for a more stable connection. On the back and sides of the box, there are a couple of USB 2.0 ports plus an RCA output. The box itself is small and sleek, and will easily sit beneath most televisions.

Fire up the box, head straight to BBC One HD and the digital box provides a good-quality image. Colours are natural, and there's a satisfying amount of detail across all HD channels. Watch in standard def and those characteristics remain, despite the drop in quality.

We have few complaints when it comes to sound quality either, with the Humax giving a peppy, relatively insightful and enjoyable performance with movies and music channels.

WHAT HI*FI? BEST PVR



This Humax box is easy to use and has a good range of Full HD content

If you need a Full HD box to give your television a bit more sparkle, this Humax is the one we'd go for. Its array of channels and apps, along with its intuitive user interface, means that even the least TV-savvy among us will be able to use it to great effect.



HD 820

For the love of sound.

Take your time. Listen. Experience the unparalleled sound of the new HD 820 dynamic closed back headphones. German engineered, these hand crafted ear pads cushion the listener and provide excellent attenuation of ambient noise, whilst unique domed glass covers over each transducer reflect sound to minimize resonances. Without doubt, a new benchmark in audiophile sound quality.

sennheiser.com/HD820



SENNHEISER

BLU-RAY PLAYERS

A sterling budget entry has put the cat among the pigeons in this category

WHAT HI*FI?
**BEST BLU-RAY PLAYER
UNDER £500**

**PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR**

View offers: whf.cm/BestBlu-rayPlayers2018

Sony UBP-X700 £189

When the Sony UBP-X700 landed in our test rooms, we hadn't encountered a budget 4K Blu-ray player capable of delivering a five-star performance. Rival machines from LG and Samsung had come close, but couldn't quite make it over the finish line.

It perhaps doesn't come as a surprise it was Sony that produced the goods. After all, this machine is closely related to 2017's Product of the Year, the UBP-X800. It boasts virtually identical features, the main difference being the 700's support for Dolby Vision HDR – a big deal in today's 4K climate.

A wonder for picture and sound

The UBP-X700 is a compact, light player, but it's not an all-plastic affair. The thin metal panels around its angled body prevent the Sony feeling cheap. While the power and eject buttons are plastic, they're prompt and work without fail.

It supports 4K 60p pictures and can play various types of disc, including SACDs and 3D Blu-rays, if you're still so

inclined. If you're a fan of streaming 4K but your TV isn't the smartest, you can buy safe in the knowledge the Sony supports 4K HDR streams on Netflix and Amazon Prime. The player's home page also includes BBC iPlayer, Demand 5, Spotify, Rakuten TV, YouTube and more.

On the connections side, there are ethernet, coaxial digital, USB and twin

"The UBP-X700 takes things to a new level with its wonderfully subtle and stable picture"

HDMI outputs – handy if you want to separate the video and audio feeds in your home cinema set-up.

Despite not flashing the hi-res audio badge, the X700 can also play up to 24-bit/192kHz files in all popular formats, including WAV, FLAC and DSD.

We've always lauded Sony for its disc players' natural-looking picture but the

The UBP-X700 can be as much a channel for 4K streaming as it is a Blu-ray player

UBP-X700 takes things to a new level with its wonderfully subtle and stable image. It balances the colourful, fantastical elements of *Thor: Ragnarok* with the more realistic hues of Earth.

The movie is a kaleidoscope of vivid colours and the Sony juggles them all with an incredibly deft hand. Our hero's red cape has depth within its folds, and sparks of lightning split the screen with startling brightness. It's a fun, involving performance with stacks of detail.

It doesn't disappoint on sound, either. Dialogue is front and centre, and wonderfully clear. Special effects are flung about with agility and precision, and there's a good amount of attack and punch. It's an engaging, immersive presentation at any price.

For the money, the X700 is a fantastic player that makes watching 4K discs an affordable reality. The Sony is so good, you'd have to pay more than three times the price to get a clear step up in quality. Which is where our next Award-winner comes in...

WHAT HI-FI?**BEST BLU-RAY PLAYER
OVER £500**

■ Panasonic DP-UB9000 £849

Some home cinema set-ups demand a Blu-ray player of even greater quality than our already superb Product of the Year. This is why products such as the DP-UB9000 exist.

With the demise of Oppo's Blu-ray player business in 2018, Panasonic has stepped up to the plate and knocked last year's Award-winning Cambridge CXUHD off its perch.

And we don't need to sit through the complete *Lord Of The Rings* trilogy on 4K Blu-ray to understand why.

Simply breathtaking

Out of the box, the Panasonic makes an immediate impression. Its build quality can best be described as bomb-proof. It makes much of its competition look and feel a little budget in comparison.

It uses a rigid two-layer chassis to help promote low noise and low vibration. The disc drive is mounted centrally and uses a thick steel plate to further reduce vibration and noise during play. The Panasonic's audio circuit gets its own

dedicated power supply to help maximise sonic performance and there's even a special circuit board for its analogue output.

Powered by Panasonic's second-generation HCX (Hollywood Cinema Experience) picture processing engine, the DP-UB9000 excels across the park. The way it deals with the information on the 4K disc of *Jumanji* (the remake) blows us away.

The jungle scenery looks breathtaking. Clouds, blue skies and lush foliage combine to create a picture rich with information and with beautifully shaded colours. From the definition on the Rock's tattoos to the frayed badges on Kevin Hart's gilet, the potent combination of detail and clarity keeps us fixed to the screen.

The DP-UB9000 also excels at upscaling 1080p Blu-rays. The Times Square battle between Spidey and Max in *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* is a great test scene, with plenty of dark detail and punchy neon colours to investigate.

The DP-UB9000 runs the second generation of Panasonic's HCX processing engine

It's these upscaling skills that set the Panasonic apart from its rivals. The picture is just clearer, sharper and more realistic across the board.

Admirably subtle

Picture quality is mirrored by a similarly robust sonic performance. During the same *Spider-Man* scene, dialogue between the two characters is crystal clear, the electrified rasp to Max's voice giving his lines a menacing feel.

The tension and danger in the scene feels immediate and the DP-UB9000 picks up all the subtlety and detail admirably, from the orchestral score darting around in the background to the crackle of electricity as it courses through Max's body.

This Panasonic is a focused, high-performance machine and we haven't come across any players in the last 12 months that translate the information on a 4K disc so spectacularly. It's no wonder the DP-UB9000 walks away with a Best Buy Award.

HOME CINEMA AMPLIFIERS

If you want to get the most out of any film, great sound is essential. These three amps show the way

WHAT HI·FI?
**BEST HOME CINEMA
AMPLIFIER UNDER £500**

**PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR**

View offers: whf.cm/BestHomeCinemaAmps2018

Sony STR-DN1080 £429

If you've ever been in the market for a home cinema amp around £500, it's likely you've heard of the Sony STR-DN1080. Not only does it retain its Product of the Year title for at least another 12 months, it's difficult to see anybody making a more entertaining receiver for this money any time soon.

It only takes a couple of minutes of listening to *Fantastic Beasts And Where To Find Them* on 4K Blu-ray and we're grinning. The Sony STR-DN1080 sounds fantastic (not beastly...), reaching deep into its reserves to deliver a performance packed with punch, dynamism and authority unheard of at this price.

There's an incredible amount of detail, from natural, expressive voices to layers of insight and depth surrounding each sound effect. As a glass window shatters under a spell, you can hear the sharp tinkling as well as the deep, sonic note rippling around the effect.

Dynamically, it's a fun and exciting listen. Quiet moments are as captivating as huge explosions going off in every

corner of the big, open soundfield – and the DN1080 handles the changing shifts with masterful control. It's enthralling.

We've seen *John Wick* more times than we'd care to admit, but the Sony keeps us glued to the action like we were watching (and hearing) it for the first time.

Gunshots are terrifically precise, and punches hit with satisfying impact. The agile and sure-footed manner in which the Sony conducts itself around the film's equally agile choreography is admirable.

Pinpoint locations

Surround effects swirl around convincingly and you can track exactly where each noise – whether it's a spell, a crash, a gunshot or a magical creature – is placed in the soundfield. It envelops you in a cocoon of sound, and that's before you engage the Dolby Atmos or DTS:X 3D soundtracks.

The additional height channels are convincing, although spreading the sound out more does take away a bit of the solidity of the performance.

Precise, swirling effects with ample low-end punch; it's unbeatable at this price

And there's so much low-end depth and texture. It's not quite as brawny as the Denon AVR-X2500H, but it pulls bass notes taut and makes an impact.

This amp has a rhythmic quality that lends itself well to music, whether you're listening to a concert Blu-ray or streaming music from Spotify.

A home cinema amp at this level isn't a match for similarly priced dedicated stereo amplifiers, but the Sony handles dynamic shifts and vocals in a fluid, articulate manner that sounds more musical than most AV amps.

High notes are reached with plenty of headroom. The sound is clear and crisp, but – unlike on some past Sony amps – that vein of solidity running through the amp keeps it from sounding bright or harsh when the volume is cranked up.

Despite its modest price, the STR-DN1080 has all you'd need from a seven-channel amp – including Dolby Atmos compatibility – but it's this superlative performance that keeps us coming back to it.

■ Denon AVR-X3500H £899

Maintaining supremacy in the marketplace isn't usually achieved by standing still. Nor is it brought about by completely remapping the route that led to success in the first place.

Denon knows that inertia leads to stagnation, and the AVR-X3500H has managed to take a step forward from its already class-leading predecessor.

The fundamentals remain the same – the AVR-X3500H is a 7.2-channel amp, with two of the channels assignable as either surround back or for height, making use of Dolby Atmos, DTS:X and DTS Virtual:X technologies.

Physical connections are similar to those on last year's model, the AVR-X3400H, with eight HDMI inputs and three outputs, each capable of 4K HDR pass-through. Denon has also added a phono input.

In line with the company's desire to progress this range from home cinema amps to a home entertainment hub, the major additions to this year's feature list are Alexa Voice Control and Apple AirPlay 2. The amp can also be a hub for a HEOS multi-room set-up.

Though its insides have been tweaked, the AVR-X3500H greets us with Denon's

recognisably bold and open soundstage, ticking boxes across the board while allowing us to become immersed in whichever source we choose.

It soon becomes clear that Denon has focused on added authority across the range. It is comfortable driving our reference PMC Twenty5 package through the rumbles and thumps of a high-action thriller, with the added solidity felt across the board as voices and soundtracks alike benefit from its authority and stability.

A satisfying fullness

That even but full balance is also unchanged, with plenty of detailed low-end not only making the action more convincing, but also delivering a performance that is consistently easy on the ears. With so much power, lesser amps could begin to provoke fatigue in the listener, but not this one.

Denon has managed this without forgoing subtlety or dynamics. The AVR-X3500H is as comfortable placing its light touch over staid drama as it is providing the punch in action movies.

This approach translates to music playback too, which is why Denon has

WHAT HI-FI?

**BEST HOME CINEMA
AMP £500-£1000**



Thoughtful updates have helped to put this Denon at the top in this price sector

placed the focus on the AVR-X3500H as an all-round entertainment system rather than simply pass-through for your home cinema. Where so many AV amps struggle, this one delivers music consummately with surprising rhythmic and dynamic prowess. Though it can't compare with a dedicated stereo amplifier, we are more than happy listening to it drive our PMC Twenty5.23s.

Denon appears to have its route to continued success figured out, and this Award serves as yet more proof.

■ Denon AVC-X6500H £2349

Despite the tweak to the model name, this is essentially a refreshing of the Award-winning AVR-X6400H. So, it's an 11-channel AV amplifier (Denon has removed the tuner section) with all the nuts and bolts required for a serious home cinema system.

Up-to-date connectivity

There are eight HDMI 2.2 inputs with eARC and 4K HDR support, compatibility with Dolby Atmos (7.1.4) and DTS:X and the ability to play hi-res music files and share them around the house via HEOS.

Otherwise, the headline feature updates are those Denon has implemented across its range of home cinema amps: the inclusion of Alexa Voice Control, Apple AirPlay 2 and a phono input giving you a truly one-box multi-use amp.

The AVC-X6500H also maintains much the same internal structure as its predecessor, with Denon making various tweaks to the circuit design. This means it retains the same overall character, but

has more power while facilitating a more sophisticated overall presentation with consistency over all sources. To give Denon credit, it seems to have worked.

Those marginal gains in performance go a lot further than their description would suggest in isolation, making for a more rounded cinematic experience.

The AVC-X6500H's extra muscle feels more authoritative, yet the amp relinquishes none of its subtlety when required to tone down its enthusiasm, offering the same impressive levels of detail throughout the frequency range.

Denon's amps have become renowned for their full-bodied presentations, but the X6500H appears to offer further solidity to dialogue without straying into it becoming unnaturally bass-heavy.

This amp's handling of both large-scale and subtle dynamic shifts impresses once again. Vocal expression is clearly defined but not exaggerated, and, as has become common while testing a Denon AV amp, we are drawn into watching the test film rather than analysing the product.

WHAT HI-FI?

**BEST HOME CINEMA
AMP OVER £1500**



Denon has managed to up the power level without sacrificing any of the subtlety

Stereo performance is also certainly comparable with the way the AVC-X6500H delivers a film, savouring that warmth and solidity while making the most of the amp's precision timing and impressive dynamic reach.

If you're in the market for a high-end amp, we can think of none better than this right now.

SPEAKER PACKAGES

Nothing brings your films to life like great surround sound. And these systems are great



WHAT HI-FI?

**BEST SPEAKER PACKAGE
£1000-£2000**

**PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR**

View offers: whf.cm/BestSpeakerPackages2018

■ Q Acoustics 3050i 5.1 Cinema Pack £1349

What happens when you take the excellent 3010i 5.1 package, then swap in a pair of Q Acoustics' brilliant 3050i floorstanders to replace the front channel boxes? You win a *What Hi-Fi?* Product of the Year Award, that's what.

In this context, the only noticeable difference to those floorstanders in the move to 'i' status is the addition of a fourth colour finish (now grey, walnut, white or black) and a chrome bezel around each driver.

But this is no mere cosmetic revamp. Cabinet rigidity has been improved, the baffle is thicker to better support the tweeter and mid/bass driver and the traditional terminal panel cut-outs make way for sockets embedded in the cabinet.

Unique to the 3050is in the range, however, is Q Acoustics' use of HPE (Helmholtz Pressure Equalizer) technology, from its high-end Concept 500 speakers. Essentially, it's a tube filled with damping material inside the cabinet, which aims to absorb unwanted energy and reduce resonance.

The 3010is, which make up the surround channels, are 25 per cent larger by volume than their predecessors, and also benefit from much of the evolution seen in their floorstanding siblings.

We'd defy anybody not to enjoy an evening spent with this speaker package. Their energy and exuberance is infectious, without being fatiguing, and those qualities are complemented by a great deal of maturity and insight too.

Fleet of foot

The power and bass weight offered by the 3050i caters for greater intensity, without forgoing the snappy timing of their more diminutive partners. That fluidity and fleet-footedness is one of the most impressive aspects of this package, avoiding rigidity for a fast but natural-sounding performance.

Misjudge your centre speaker, where so much of the dialogue is delivered, in a home cinema package and you're heading for trouble. Thankfully, Q Acoustics makes no such mistake. Paired

Careful attention to design has paid off for Q Acoustics in this exuberant, insightful package

with the 3050i, the speaker performs wonderfully. Here, it seems even more dynamic and engaging than when partnered with the 3010i fronts.

The sub's output is augmented by the 3050is taking on part responsibility for bass power, which means plenty of extra low-end detail. Insight generally is better too, especially with soundtracks, where the 3050is pick out extra strands and organise them with the same precision we heard when testing them as a stereo pair. Their general musicality doesn't go unnoticed either, with subtle and large-scale dynamics delivered with confidence and deft understanding.

That's all well and good, you might be thinking, but what earns this combo Product of the Year status? Simple. We believe you'd have to spend twice as much - for example, on Monitor Audio's Award-winning Silver 200 AV12 package - to get an obvious performance upgrade. And with the 3010i Cinema Pack fending off rivals at the other end of the price scale, Q Acoustics is sitting pretty here.

■ Wharfedale DX-2 £399

This little gem appeared in our test rooms over the summer and won us all over in no time. If you're short on space yet want to get closer to the surround sound cinema experience than a soundbar can take you, here's your solution.

The DX-2 is a tiny, charming and extremely capable 5.1 surround speaker package. Standing just 19cm tall, the four satellite speakers are small enough to fit almost anywhere.

While we'd recommend placing the satellites on dedicated supports, they are designed to feel at home on top of shelves, on bookcases – anywhere you can find a spare spot in your room, really. Don't have the space or budget for stands? You can wall-mount them instead, thanks to the brackets at the back of each speaker.

The glossy-fronted cabinets, available in white or black, have curved edges and the smooth leather-like finish wrapped around the speakers removes the need for spikes or rubber feet, so you can place them directly on surfaces without fear of scratches. It's a sleek, smart look.

Each satellite has a 19mm silk-dome tweeter and a 7.5cm mid/bass driver,

with the centre channel using two of the mid/bass drivers to flank the tweeter.

The WH-D8 active subwoofer completes the set. Comprising a forward-firing 20cm long-throw driver powered by a 70W amplifier, it's compact enough to be tucked away in a corner. Build quality is good for the money.

It sounds bigger than it looks

Speakers this size often struggle to handle Hans Zimmer's epic score for *Inception*, but as the dream finally collapses in the film's final act, the DX-2 package delivers a respectable scale of sound – larger and heftier than its stature would suggest. It sounds punchy, weighty and surprisingly expansive.

The DX-2 may be designed for smaller rooms, but it copes admirably even in our large AV test room. There's plenty of detail too, and no small amount of skill when handling dynamic shifts.

The DX-2 speakers are well integrated too. Surround effects ping around the room, engulfing you in an articulate cocoon of sound. The haunting whispers on the island in *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* are clear, precise and chilling.

WHAT HI-FI?

**BEST SPEAKER PACKAGE
UNDER £500**



Weight, detail, integration – and punch. In fact, the DX-2 punches well above its weight

The edges of notes are precise and clean too, and dialogue cuts through the swathe of special effects, although we would prefer more texture and depth to voices. Rey's hopeful entreaties contrast nicely with an elderly Luke's grumbles, but more low-frequency detail would flesh out the emotion in their voices.

You'll have to move to the likes of the significantly-pricier Q Acoustics 3010i 5.1 for greater articulacy and heft; at this price, the DX-2 is peerless.

■ Q Acoustics 3010i 5.1 Cinema Pack £895

If a 5.1 home cinema package comprises four five-star speakers, then it would appear to be well over halfway to five-star fame itself. This 5.1 beauty has the centre-speaker-and-sub elements to carry it the rest of the way. With ease.

The heart of the Q Acoustics 3010i 5.1 Cinema Pack is two pairs of the company's 3010i standmounts, to which we gave five stars earlier this year, and they're backed up by the 3090i centre speaker and 3060S subwoofer.

The centre speaker features the same 10cm mid/bass driver as the 3010i, while the unit in the 150W active subwoofer – the slimmest sub the company has made – is, unsurprisingly, larger at 20cm.

Braced and thickened

The centre and 3010is both feature a 20mm soft-dome tweeter, and benefit from the same P2P (point-to-point) cabinet bracing and thickened baffle in the drive for structural rigidity. Though you can sit them on a sturdy flat surface, we'd recommend saving some of your budget for stands.

With the kit all wired up and director Edgar Wright's feature *Baby Driver* playing, we're treated to a convincing and entertaining surround sound presentation. You get a strong sense of this package's hi-fi roots, its effortless musicality breezing through the film's enjoyably eclectic soundtrack. From the drumbeats of Kashmere Stage Band's *Kashmere* to the jazzy piano in Carla Thomas' *B-A-B-Y*, the performance is urgent and detailed.

There's scale and spaciousness aplenty too, as well as tight integration between the speakers. Placed around our AV testing room, they manage to deliver a gapless, coherent soundfield.

As the smallest standmount in the 3000i range, the 3010is can only bring so much bass though – so that is where the subwoofer comes in. We play *Alien: Covenant* and the sub brings definite low-end presence to the otherwise bass-limited presentation. It provides atmospheric rumble when the *Covenant* hovers on-screen, and more devastating bass during thunder and explosions.

WHAT HI-FI?

**BEST SPEAKER PACKAGE
£500-£1000**



An easy musicality combines with a sense of scale to give an engaging presentation

During the opening dialogue between Guy Pearce and Michael Fassbender, the centre speaker takes the opportunity to reveal its facility for detail and tonal synchronicity with the 3010is. Pearce's voice is clearly projected, with a richness that gets under his commandments.

You're onto a winner if you can supply convincing detail, scale and subtlety at this price. Q Acoustics definitely can.

View offers: whf.cm/BestSpeakerPackages2018

■ Monitor Audio Silver 200 AV12 £2875

Keep it under your hat, but if it weren't for Fyne Audio spectacularly bursting onto the scene, Monitor Audio's Silver 200 floorstanders would surely have retained their 2017 Best floorstander Award (£800-£1200). They're that good and, thankfully, are the headline act of this talented AV12 package, which does retain its gong.

We have previously cooed over the 200's speed, expression and sense of fun as a stereo pair, and none of that has been lost in their role as a part of an AV-orientated family. But let's not pass over their three equally talented protagonists - the Silver C150 centre speaker, Silver FX surround speakers and Silver W-12 subwoofer.

The whole Silver range was designed to be as compact and position-flexible as possible, but the 200s thrive most when placed around 50cm from our back wall.

The 25mm gold-dome tweeter - one either side of a mid/bass driver on the angled fascia of the Silver FX, and one each on the Silver 200 and Silver C150 - on this sixth-generation Silver range has been fine-tuned for clearer, smoother

and distortion-free high frequencies. The larger drivers use technology from the company's flagship Platinum II Series aimed at lowering distortion and enabling cleaner-sounding highs.

The Silver 200 and Silver C150 each have two 13cm C-CAM drivers, while the Silver FXs have a 15cm driver in a two-way crossover.

And then there's the Silver W-12 subwoofer, which faces us with a 30cm version of the dished C-CAM cone and is driven by a 500W Class-D amplifier. It also offers three EQ settings.

The whole package is available in black oak, walnut, rosenut, natural oak and satin white or, if you're happy to pay an extra £290, high gloss-black veneer.

This set needs time to excel but, after some 100 hours, the crashes, bangs and wallops of *The Lego Batman Movie* are thrown at us, as if physically travelling round the room, with incredible cohesion.

As a whole, the package times with military precision, and the centre speaker offers subtle inflections in deadpan vocal deliveries, urgency in moments of panic and musicality in the



WHAT HI-FI?
BEST SPEAKER PACKAGE
£2000-£5000

Rarely do different speakers cohere as beautifully as these ones do. Or sound as exciting

soundtrack. The whole thing is enthusiastic, expressive and expansive.

And our admiration fails to dwindle as we shift to a DVD of Radiohead playing *The King Of Limbs*. Even through an AV amp, there is that same musical quality we've heard from the 200s via the CD.

We remain as impressed as we were last year with this package's ability to excel with stereo music as much as it does with surround sound from films.

■ PMC Twenty5.23 5.1 £10,290

We've moved up in the world. Having spent three years listening to PMC's Twenty.23 5.1 speaker package as an element of our reference kit, we've now assigned that role to the Twenty5.23 5.1, part of a range that, as its name suggests, celebrates PMC's quarter century. That said, perhaps we no longer need to persuade you that this set-up deserves our top-price Best speaker package Award. But we'll have a go anyway.

Compact and good-looking

Comprising two stereo pairs alongside a centre speaker and sub, the stars of our new reference speaker package are the Twenty5.23s. These floorstanders act as front and surround channels in this set-up. Standing just over 90cm high and 16cm wide, they are compact enough to fit into most rooms without intruding. And they're good-looking too - beautifully made and finished with care.

Their cabinets retain the now-established slanted look, but the company has done a lot of work to make it as solid and low-resonance as possible. The tweeter is a 27mm soft-dome affair

engineered to deliver insightful sound with wide dispersion while the larger driver is a 14cm unit. The centre speaker uses two of the mid/bass drivers.

Finally comes the Twenty5.sub. Its 400W Class-D ultra-low-distortion amplifier and dual 17cm bass drivers can deliver frequencies down to 22Hz.

When it comes to performance, there's a significant step up from the Twenty range. One key aspect has always been speech delivery, and on that score the detail and dynamic sensitivity these Twenty5s show is striking. Subtle inflections retain their delicacy and the overall insight and texture make this one of the most lifelike reproductions of the human voice it's possible to achieve for the money.

As with the previous package, this is aided by the solidity of the bass and lower midrange, which give the presentation ample body.

The Twenty5s are wonderfully agile, punchy performers - right down to the depths of the low end offered by the sub. It rumbles rather than hums, delivers staccato jabs rather than flabby hooks,



WHAT HI-FI?
BEST SPEAKER PACKAGE
OVER £5000

Deep, penetrating bass; beautifully rendered speech; and an infectious sense of sheer fun

and keeps pace with blockbuster action as easily as it does with rhythmically demanding soundtracks.

Most of all though, this package is a whole lot of fun. It's appropriately analytical of its source material but its enthusiasm just makes us smile.

Usually we'd think twice before parting with more than 10 grand, but here we're struggling to imagine another such purchase we'd make so promptly.

PROJECTORS

Cinemas project – and, at their best, so do home cinemas. And these two do so beautifully

View offers: whf.com/BestProjectors2018

■ Optoma UHD40 £1200

Optoma takes up this prestigious spot for a second year running, but not for the UHD65 model that was here in last year's Awards (and also below).

The UHD40 is the brand's more affordable 4K sibling, and actually the most affordable beamer we're decorating this year.

It certainly looks the part – it's small enough to fit on any table – and set-up is taken care of by top-panel zoom and focus controls, two HDMI ports, and a USB Type A connection so you can power streaming sticks.

Giving this projector its 4K capabilities is a 12mm chip that, while not natively 4K, works in conjunction with two million microscopic mirrors to put the full 8.3 million pixels on screen – a technology that allows cheaper products to deliver the superior resolution.

The UHD40's HDR feature is a little more complex. While most HDR content is in the form of HDR10, which requires a BT.2020 colour space, the UHD40 is only capable of recreating the smaller Rec.709 colour space, meaning that while the

projector can accept HDR content, it's unable to fully show off the true range of colours available.

But any blemishes in the specs are quickly put to the back of our minds as we play *Blue Planet II* on Ultra HD Blu-ray. From the moment the logo appears on screen, we're met with a punchy image from the UHD40's 2,400 lumen lamp (which Optoma says has a 4000-hour lifespan on maximum setting).

The deep, rich blues of the ocean stand out well against the dark black background and the way the sun curves around the planet offers a range of yellow light flares.

As the camera moves over the Great Barrier Reef, the sprinkling of greenery – trees, shrubs and earth – on the side of the mountains are diverse and delicate.

We dive under the water to examine life on the reef, watching a cuttlefish change the pigments on its skin, and the streaks of blue-white light along its body walk that fine line of both being natural yet impressive. Rather than letting the bright colours wipe out the lesser hues,



WHAT HI*FI?

BEST PROJECTOR
UNDER £1500

PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR

To have access to
this level of tech
and performance
at such a low price
is a revelation

the UHD40 still shows the little scratches and ridges on the cuttlefish's face.

We would recommend turning the UltraDetail setting to its lowest mode and turning on the Dynamic Black mode for the best range of dark colours. Other projectors might handle black detail a little better, but the UHD40 still performs well, especially considering its low price.

The UHD40 delivers again as we move to a standard Blu-ray – colours remain natural, movement is smooth, and detail levels don't let the side down.

Rival manufacturers are going to have a hard time trumping this performance; top-class tech at a budget price point.

■ Optoma UHD65 £3000

Optoma's UHD65 may have lost its Product of the Year crown to some healthy sibling competition, but where there are losses there are gains – it's not only one of just two Best Buys in this category now, it's also the most premium.

A 4K HDR picture as good as the UHD65's will be more than good enough for most home cinema set-ups – even if, like the UHD40, it doesn't boast a native 4K chip. Put simply, the UHD65 is a wonderful achievement and sets the bar high for Optoma's competitors. It offers an improved 1,200,000:1 contrast ratio and 2200 lumen output over its sibling, which help it deliver a clear and marked step up in picture quality.

We tuck into *Guardians Of The Galaxy Vol.2* and the UHD65's colour and contrast capabilities have us wide-eyed as the red and green foliage of Ego's planet pops nicely against the pastel landscape.

The difference between Ego and Starlord's skin-tones and the backdrop of

the alien world is carefully balanced, the UHD65 managing to look natural while capturing the vibrancy of the new planet.

Not one to skimp on detail either, it provides an insightful rendition of Starlord's hair and the glimmer of cosmic lights in his eyes as Ego tries to brainwash him during the film's climax.

Changing to a Blu-ray of *Pacific Rim*, we're pleased to see the same characteristics. While there's an expected drop in the range and richness of colours in the Full HD resolution, the UHD65 still provides an enjoyable and insightful image. Still rely on your DVDs? They will be adequately upscaled too.

There are two HDMI ports on the back – one is HDCP 2.2-compatible so can support 4K HDR content – and two VGA connections (for computers), an ethernet port, a USB port, and an array of connections to allow control of the projector through a home network. 3.5mm and optical audio ports complete



WHAT HI*FI?

BEST PROJECTOR
OVER £1500

It might not be
feature-packed
but this premium
beamer's picture
delivers in spades

what is a pretty decent connections list.

The UHD65 may not have all the bells and whistles of a truly high-end projector (e.g. native 4K or electronic controls), but it will keep you happy for years. We've said it before, but it bears repeating: top work, Optoma.

TEMPTATION AWARD

Of all the dream-fulfilling kit we've reviewed this year, this amplifier is the dreamiest

WHAT HI-FI?
TEMPTATION



PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

View offers: whf.cm/BestTemptations2018

PMC Cor £4995

PMC is no stranger to winning *What Hi-Fi?* Awards. Over the years it has won a truck-full for its range of elegant, capable speakers. But an amplifier? Really? But PMC can only make speakers...

Those were our initial thoughts when we first heard about the Cor. It turns out we needn't have been so concerned. This integrated amplifier is good enough to give established high-end amplifier manufacturers a real fright. With hindsight, we shouldn't have been surprised - the company has been making amps since it was founded in 1991.

The Cor is a simple beast at heart. Its designers aimed for transparency and musicality above all else - qualities that tend to be stifled when combined with complexity and an extensive features list.

To that end this is a purely analogue amplifier with short, clean signal paths. It uses Class A/B circuitry and produces 95W per channel, which rises to 140W into a 4 ohm load. On paper that's a good, if not exceptional, set of figures, but in use, this amplifier belies those

numbers by delivering high volume levels with a whole range of speakers.

The fluted design isn't just intended to look distinctive, it's also meant to aid heat dissipation. We like the metal remote - it's nicely weighted and so much better to use than the offerings most high-end companies supply.

An unflappable performer that just gets out of the way of the recording and lets the music take centre stage

At the front, you'll find a large volume control, a series of tactile press buttons for input selection, mono and a bypass mode that gives the cleanest signal path (leaving the tone controls out of circuit). The bass, treble and balance controls are operated by motorised slider switches of the type more usually seen in a top-spec mixing desk, and it's fun seeing them move when using the remote.

After something that eschews fancy features to focus on stunning sound? Here it is

The Cor is an unflappable performer that just gets out of the way of the recording and lets the music take centre stage. It's unfussy about partnering speakers too, sounding as at home with our reference ATC SCM 50s as it does with more price-compatible products.

Words like solid, robust and confident keep turning up in our test notes. Listen to a demanding piece of music such as Stravinsky's *The Rite Of Spring* and the PMC responds with enthusiasm. It delivers the symphony's wide-ranging dynamics with ease, rendering crescendos with control and punch. There's an enviable degree of substance to the lows and they lack nothing when it comes to grip and agility.

We move onto Beyoncé's *Sorry* and revel in the PMC's handling of rhythms. This amplifier really times well, sounding as musically cohesive as they come.

If you're after a top-class integrated amplifier, listen to this. It's our favourite Temptations product this year. Not a bad effort for a speaker manufacturer, is it?

READERS' AWARD

When it comes to hi-fi kit, this Award shows that *What Hi-Fi?* readers really know their stuff

**PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR**



View offers: whf.cm/ReadersAward2018

Monitor Audio Silver 100 £650

We were hugely impressed by the Monitor Audio Silver 100s when we reviewed them back in January. And, it seems they've also left quite an impression on our readers.

The Silver 100s are one of the most popular products on whathifi.com, and they managed to fend off nine shortlisted contenders to secure this year's Readers' Award. The other nominations included a number of talented Award-winners including the Chord Qutest DAC, LG OLED55C8PLA OLED television and Sonos Beam soundbar.

But it's the Silver 100s that emerged victorious in the polls and it's not hard to understand why. They're the larger of two pairs of standmounters in the Silver series. They boast a modern and sophisticated look, enhanced by the impressive-looking 20cm C-CAM (ceramic-coated aluminium/magnesium) drivers used in each cabinet.

To connect the voice coil to the cone, each driver uses Monitor Audio's clever DCF coupling mechanism that's trickled

down from the company's flagship Platinum II Series. This design element helps lower distortion and promote cleaner-sounding highs.

The speakers also use Monitor Audio's trademark 25mm gold-dome tweeter. It's sat behind an eye-catching speckled grille and delivers smooth and distortion-free high frequencies.

At the rear of each cabinet is Monitor Audio's HiVe II bass port. It uses a straight-ribbed design to accelerate airflow and reduce turbulence, moving air in and out of the speaker more swiftly for faster, powerful bass response.

Ideally you should enjoy looking at your speakers as much as listening to them and Monitor Audio's wide range of finishes comes in handy here. There are six to choose from: walnut, black oak, natural oak, rosenut, high gloss black and satin white.

Like the rest of the Silver range, the 100s are versatile with positioning - putting them right up against a wall will accentuate that bottom end, but without

The What Hi-Fi?
readers have
spoken - and you
chose wisely

sacrificing too much of pace or dynamic thrust. It's this kind of flexibility that really appeals when considering a new pair of speakers.

The Silver 100s take a couple of days to properly run in, which is a little longer than the majority of loudspeakers at this price - but they are well worth the wait. Once up and running, punch and dynamic expression is where these standmounters really excel - their smooth balance suits a wide range of musical genres and makes them easier to match with compatible electronics.

They don't just time well, but communicate the emotion in every vocal, the energy in every snapping rhythm. There's plenty of texture drawn on instruments too, but the Silvers manage to resist the temptation to rely on all-out analysis to entertain.

If you want a great standmounter there aren't many that can entertain in the same way as the Monitor Audio Silver 100s. By public demand, these are 2018 Award-winners.

The Professionals Choice

When musician Paul Carrack (*Ace, Squeeze, & Mike + Mechanics*) was mixing his new album, *These Days*, he needed a portable DAC that he could trust – the **DragonFly Red** was the perfect solution.

"The AudioQuest DragonFly was a revelation helping us hear every musical detail with such a natural tonality"
Paul Carrack



To find out more about Paul's live tour, the album and ways to win LPs & CDs, gig tickets and DragonFly Red DACs visit: <http://bit.ly/AudioQuest>



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HALL OF FAME

Our special recognition for the product that emerges as the champion of champions

■ Sony STR-DN1080

We may soon need to buy a new thesaurus before we exhaust the list of superlatives with which we can laud Sony's STR-DN1080.

Successive Product of the Year titles spotlight the stranglehold this AV amplifier has at the entry-level end of the market, but its entry into our Hall of Fame - where it keeps lofty company with KEF's LS50 Wireless, last year's winner - represents a new high. It's recognition of how Sony has remapped and redefined just what a sub-£500 home cinema amplifier is capable of.

So easy is it at this price for a manufacturer to exhaust its focus on a sound with power belying an amp's cost, providing an immediately arresting but one-dimensional performance. But Sony has proven the power of expression and fine detail - without forgoing heft - to the point that it feels we've never really tested the STR-DN1080, merely basked in the glory of its company.

Listening to it is a breeze, and Sony makes equal light work of presenting



even the most hectic of movie scenes. With fleet-footed timing, a commanding sense of organisation and a marvellously clean and balanced tone, there is simply no area in which this Sony doesn't trounce most of its competition, let alone fall any way short.

While it is unfair to make a direct comparison with stereo amps at the same price, the STR-DN1080's delightfully lyrical bent makes it a fine option for music playback as well, serving only to further dumbfound as to how a product can offer so much at such a tantalising price.

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

We're still wondering how this AV amp offers everything it does for the money

WHAT HI-FI? HALL OF FAME

It has all the nuts and bolts necessary for an immersive seven-channel presentation, of course, with 4K HDR pass-through and technology that feigns the existence of surround back speakers if you'd prefer to use two for Dolby Atmos. And it's a slick, intuitive unit to use, not to mention its sophisticated aesthetic.

But you won't be properly convinced to take it home until you've experienced its sonic performance. Unless you have a budget stretching to at least double the amount, we'd bet it is a long time before there is anything equipped to better it.



OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTION

■ Eric Kingdon

Senior European Technical Marketing Manager, Sony

Introduced last year, this category is, uniquely, an Award for an individual rather than a product - designed to recognise a figure from the world of consumer electronics who has made an outstanding contribution.

Whether it's developing, designing or marketing specific products, being a visionary thinker who establishes a brand as a leader in its category, or having the passion and eloquence to explain the minutiae of equipment to retailers and consumers alike, anyone deserving of this auspicious Award will have worked hard to achieve it.

The winner of our 2018 Outstanding Contribution Award is a man who has dedicated a huge part of his working life to ensuring that the products consumers buy are the best they can be.

Since 1984, Eric Kingdon has worked tirelessly behind the scenes at Sony, both in the UK and with his colleagues in Japan, to help develop hi-fi and home cinema products that people can not only afford, but that sound fabulous too.

Described as 'the ears of Sony' and a 'guru with a unique passion and understanding', he is regarded as a legend throughout the industry.

Eric's commitment to excellence is legendary. He has been described as 'the ears of Sony'

Being invited to Eric's secret room at hi-fi shows in Europe or the US is a privilege. There he will wax lyrical about the clever engineering - and the blood, sweat and tears - that has gone into developing Sony's latest product. His passion is infectious.

Whether it's an affordable stereo or multi-channel amplifier, a state-of-the-art Blu-ray player, USB turntable or high-end pair of speakers, Eric's magic touch will have made them that little bit more special.

A modest man who does not seek the limelight, he has worked tirelessly to produce Award-winning products. It is no coincidence that our 2018 Hall of Fame Award is a Sony product that Eric played a significant part in developing, the STR-DN1080 AV amplifier. That is testament to the extraordinary engineering skills of Eric and his team.

It is fitting that we are bestowing this Award in a year in which Sony has produced eight Best Buys and three Products of the Year. It is thoroughly deserved recognition of Eric's outstanding contribution to the industry.

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NOW WITH THE BEST BUYS IN EVERY CATEGORY

This is the definitive guide to the best home-entertainment kit you can buy. From 75in TVs to smartphones, from portable Bluetooth speakers to Dolby Atmos surround sound packages, here's where you'll find the perfect product, fast.

NEW ENTRIES This month, ProAc's hugely impressive Response DT8 floorstanding loudspeakers join some sub-£2000 rivals, and Naim's Uniti Star streaming system proves a massive hit with our review team.



Q Acoustics 3050i 5.1 Cinema Pack, p138
"It's worth stressing just how talented the 3050i 5.1 Cinema Pack is. It's an instant hit"



Sony KD-65AF9, p140
"Exceptional motion processing, superb detail, awesome 1080p delivery, and excellent sound"



> HI-FI

STEREO AMPLIFIERS	109
PRE- & POWER AMPLIFIERS	110
CD PLAYERS	111
DACs	112
MUSIC STREAMERS	114
RADIOS	115
STEREO SPEAKERS	122
MULTI-ROOM SYSTEMS	126
STEREO SYSTEMS	126
TURNTABLES	128
WIRELESS SPEAKERS	130

> HOME CINEMA

BLU-RAY PLAYERS	132
HOME-CINEMA AMPLIFIERS	132
PROJECTORS	133
SET-TOP BOXES	134
SOUNDBARS	134
SOUNDBASES	135
SPEAKER PACKAGES	135
VIDEO STREAMERS	138
TELEVISIONS	139

> PORTABLE

HEADPHONES	141
PORTABLE MUSIC PLAYERS	145
SMARTPHONES	146
STREAMING APPS & SERVICES	146
TABLETS	148

> ACCESSORIES

ANALOGUE INTERCONNECTS	149
AV & HI-FI RACKS	149
HEADPHONE AMPLIFIERS	150
MAINS PRODUCTS	150
PHONO AMPLIFIERS	151
SPEAKER CABLES	153
SPEAKER STANDS	153

TV TECHNOLOGY EXPLAINED

Advances in TV technology have spawned a host of new acronyms and confusing formats. What do they mean? See p140 for more

HOW TO WATCH F1 ON TV IN 4K...

With the F1 season reaching its conclusion, we have the lowdown on how and where you can catch the action. Turn to p147 for more details



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BLUESOUND 2i

Bluesound Generation 2i is the next iteration of the Bluesound product lineup. Building on the strengths and success of the Gen 2 platform, Gen 2i boasts several technological updates that will be sure to add to the excitement and demand for these popular products.

AirPlay 2

AirPlay 2 adds a whole new dimension to the world of streaming possibilities in the Bluesound ecosystem. With AirPlay 2, you can stream just about any sound from your iPhone or iPad to a Gen 2i Player. As long as you have at least one Gen 2i Player, any AirPlay-enabled iOS App is now a potential source for your Bluesound eco-system.

TWO-WAY BLUETOOTH

Gen 2i contains Bluesound's most advanced take on Bluetooth to date - two-way Bluetooth, featuring both Receive and Transmit functionality. This not only allows users to wirelessly stream from a device but also to transmit what your listening to via Bluetooth to a pair of wireless headphones.

aptX HD BLUETOOTH

An enhanced codec that supports 24-bit music quality over Bluetooth. With the ability to support streams up to 24bit/48kHz, streaming to/from an aptX HD compatible device to a Gen 2i Player can provide better-than-CD quality, wirelessly.

DUAL-BAND WIFI

The upgraded WiFi chipset technology in Bluesound Players can take advantage of the less noisy 5GHz band if needed resulting in faster connection time and fewer interruptions from other network traffic.

PULSE FAMILY AMPLIFICATION

The all-new, custom-designed digital amplifiers in the Pulse 2i and Pulse Mini 2i effectively double the available power used to drive these speakers. Improved bass response and more powerful sonic landscapes are the new norm in Gen 2i.

NEW



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ADVERT VALID UNTIL 12/12/2018. E&OE



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NEW **£699**

NAD • C 568 • TURNTABLE
Time to enjoy vinyl collections with extraordinary quality! This two speed belt driven turntable features a rigid MDF plinth and a 9" Carbon Fibre tonearm with both VTF and Azimuth adjustment and is supplied with an Ortofon 2M Red cartridge pre-installed.



NEW **£149**

PRO-JECT • PRIMARY E • TURNTABLE
2-speed turntable based on the multi-award winning Primary. Supplied with pre-fitted Ortofon OM cartridge. Acrylic lid included.



£249 **WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2015** **DSD**

SONY • PS-HX500 • USB TURNTABLE
The PS-HX500 is equipped with a high-quality A/D converter. So just connect it to your PC with a USB cable and record your vinyl as High-Resolution Audio tracks. This is a great way to backup your precious vinyl collection.



£999

PRO-JECT • 2 XPRESSION DC ACRYL • TURNTABLE
Based on the 2Xperience with upgraded motor control and a high-end 9cc Evolution carbon fibre tonearm for improved performance.



£1999 **WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2015**

NAIM • UNITI ATOM • ALL-IN-ONE STREAMING SYSTEM
Uniti Atom is a beautiful, compact multi-source music player that is perfect as a high-end main system or for use in the kitchen or study where space is at a premium.



£3499

NAIM • UNITI STAR • STREAMING/CD SYSTEM
The clue is in the name: this system is the star of the show. With plenty of features and the ability to play, rip, store and serve your treasured music collection, Uniti Star offers infinite possibilities. Ready to go with practically any speaker set-up, Uniti Star will have you rediscovering your entire music collection with a deep, immersive sound.



NEW **£699**

ARCAM • CD550 / SA10 • CD/STREAMER / AMPLIFIER/DAC
New CD550 audio disc player with UPnP and CIFS streaming up to 24-bit/192kHz and SA10 50wpc ultra-low distortion type Class A/B amplifier/DAC.



£349 **WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2015**

MARANTZ • CD/PM6006 UK EDITION • CD/AMPLIFIER
Replacing the highly acclaimed CD and PM6006. Enhancements have been made in sound-critical areas, giving these exclusive UK Edition models even better performance.



£1149 **£1099**

NAIM • CD5si / NAIT 5si • CD PLAYER / AMPLIFIER
The CD5si CD player, especially when partnered with the complementary NAIT 5si integrated amplifier, sets a thrilling new standard for musical performance at Naim's entry level.



£599 **£799**

NAD • C 568 / C 368 • CD / AMPLIFIER/DAC
Future-proof Hybrid Digital DAC Amplifier with two MDC slots for a variety of optional modules including BluOS. The C 568 CD player is an ideal companion to the C 368.



£3799 **£3499**

NAD • M32 / M50.2 • AMPLIFIER / STREAMER
Top-of-the-line, BluOS - ready integrated amplifier and music streamer with a host of features.



NEW **£279** **NEW** **£399**

PIONEER • PD30AE / A40AE • CD / AMPLIFIER
The PD30AE features a dedicated CD drive with a high-accuracy clock. The A40AE includes a MM phono input along with optical and coaxial digital inputs. Hi-Res Audio is also supported.

Bowers & Wilkins 600 Series 2 EXCLUSIVE OFFERS

683 S2 £799
SAVE £350

684 S2 £599
SAVE £200

685 S2 £349
SAVE £150 (Price excludes stands)

HTM61 S2 £399
SAVE £150

HTM62 S2 £249
SAVE £100



SPECIAL OFFER



NEW **£599**

NAD • D 3045 • DAC / AMPLIFIER
The NAD D 3045 is everything a modern amplifier should be: compact, energy efficient, powerful, silent, high-resolution enabled, and packed with cutting edge features. NAD's expertise in both digital and analogue engineering is on full display in this flexible and affordable amplifier.

Features include: 2 x 60W Hybrid Digital amplifier, two-way Bluetooth powered by Qualcomm aptX HD audio, Asynchronous USB 24/192 input supporting MQA and DSD, Digital and Analogue inputs and MM Phono input.



BOWERS & WILKINS • 702 S2
This floorstander features a wealth of state-of-the-art technologies, including a solid body Carbon Dome tweeter housing. The 702 S2 brings goosebump-inducing clarity and detail to your home audio set-up.

£3299



BOWERS & WILKINS • 606
New 600 series 2-way standmount/bookshelf speaker combining Decoupled Double Dome tweeter technology with a 6.5-inch Continuum cone mid/bass driver. Matt black or white finish.

NEW £549

Price excludes speaker stands



MONITOR AUDIO BRONZE 2
The Bronze 2 builds on the strength of its predecessor's audiophile credibility with a neutral tonal balance and high detail resolution combined with high overall efficiency and power handling.

£279



FOCAL • ARIA 926
This 3-way loudspeaker features Focal's exclusive Flax cone, characterised by its low coloration and natural sound, coupled with Focal's inverted dome TNF tweeter. Black high gloss and real wood walnut veneer finishes.

£1999



KEF • R3
A true three-way speaker, the 165mm bass driver pushes bass performance to new extremes. The 125mm midrange driver and 25mm aluminium dome tweeter creates a Uni-Q array that defies the expectations from the most compact main speaker in the range.

NEW £1299

Price excludes speaker stands



Q ACOUSTICS 3020i
Substantial speakers with 125mm and 22mm precision drivers, which can be shelf-mounted on pre-fitted rubber feet, stand or wall-mounted on optional, dedicated stands and brackets.

NEW £249



MONITOR AUDIO SILVER 200
The Silver 200's sleek appearance makes it a truly compact and attractive floorstander, blending audiophile performance with lifestyle proportions.

£999

Standard finishes • Black Gloss £1099

KEF • Q350
The remarkable Q Series speakers excel when space is limited. Featuring the signature KEF Uni-Q driver array with Computational Fluid Dynamics (CFD) port design, the Q350s deliver detailed natural sound with high clarity and tight bass.

£499



B&W • PX WIRELESS HEADPHONES

£329



PSB • M4U 8 WIRELESS HEADPHONES

NEW £299



GRADO • SR80e HEADPHONES

ESSAV.COM



SONY • WH-1000XM3 WIRELESS HEADPHONES

NEW £329.95



SONOS

The Home Sound System

The Sonos Wireless HiFi System delivers all the music on earth, in every room, with warm, full-bodied sound that's crystal clear at any volume. Sonos can fill your home with music by combining HiFi sound and rock-solid wireless in a smart system that is easy to set-up, control and expand.

PRICES FROM £149



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Multi-room system
Best multi-room system over £500
Sonos

BLUESOUND

2i

Bluesound Generation 2i is the next iteration of the Bluesound product lineup. Building on the strengths and success of the Gen 2 platform, Gen 2i boasts several technological updates that will be sure to add to the excitement and demand for these popular products.

Generation 2i Range: Node 2i, PowerNode 2i, Vault 2i, Pulse 2i, Pulse Flex 2i, Pulse Mini 2i and Pulse Soundbar 2i.



Apple Music, Amazon Music, Spotify, Tidal, YouTube Music, Pandora, iHeartRadio, SiriusXM, TuneIn, and more.



KEF • LS50 WIRELESS • HI-RES WIRELESS SPEAKERS
The beauty of the LS50 Wireless is its effortless combination of simplicity and elegance. It is easy to set up and use, yet offers sophisticated sound fit for audiophiles through inspired audio engineering.

£1999



BLUESOUND • POWERNODE 2i HI-RES WIRELESS MUSIC STREAMER / AMPLIFIER
The POWERNODE 2i is the streaming amplifier that merges several traditional components into one and unlocks a world of high fidelity streaming, while effortlessly driving your choice of speakers.

NEW £799



BLUESOUND • NODE 2i HI-RES WIRELESS MUSIC STREAMER
The NODE 2i easily connects to any existing system to unlock a universe of audio streaming, with more than enough analog and digital input/output options to please the most ardent audiophile.

NEW £499





ARCAM • FMJ AVR550 • AV RECEIVER
Dolby Atmos 7.1.4 capable AV receiver that is equally at home with high resolution surround sound or two-channel music.
Also Available: ARCAM FMJ AVR390 & FMJ AVR850



DENON • AVR-X3500H • AV RECEIVER
7.2-channel receiver supporting Dolby Atmos, DTS:X and DTS Virtual:X. 8 HDMI inputs and 2 outputs with HDCP 2.2.
Also Available: DENON AVR-X2500H



DENON • AVC-X6500H • AV AMPLIFIER
Enjoy the most complete surround sound experience with latest audio formats Dolby Atmos, DTS:X and Auro-3D built-in.
Also Available: DENON AVC-X8500H



PIONEER • VSX-LX503 • AV RECEIVER
This highly specified 9.2-channel receiver handles Dolby Atmos and DTS:X soundtracks in 5.2.4 or 7.2.2 configurations.
Also Available: PIONEER VSX-933



SONY • STR-DN1080 • AV RECEIVER
With flexible speaker solutions, DTS:X and Dolby Atmos support, the STR-DN1080 delivers mighty, cinematic surround sound.
Also Available: YAMAHA RX-A680



YAMAHA • RX-A3080 • AV RECEIVER
9.2-channel receiver MusicCast, Dolby Atmos and DTS:X support, along with Spotify, Bluetooth, AirPlay.
Also Available: YAMAHA RX-A1080

BLUESOUND • PULSE 2i SOUNDBAR
Not only does the PULSE 2i SOUNDBAR not require a subwoofer to get full natural sound, but it also includes BluOS, Bluesound's powerful wireless multi-room streaming music app, it's also an all-in-one music system that rivals many high-end audio systems.



CANTON • DM 60 • SOUNDBASE
This 6-driver design, ideal for small/medium-sized rooms, transforms TV sound, plus offers Bluetooth music streaming, in a sleek, glass-topped cabinet.



B&W • MT-60D • SPEAKER PACKAGE
Speaker package combining M-1 speakers with the stunning power and control of a PV10 subwoofer. Matt black or white.



SONOS • BEAM SOUNDBAR WITH AMAZON ALEXA VOICE CONTROL
Experience incredible sound while streaming music, watching TV and movies, enjoying podcasts and audiobooks, or playing video games. With easy voice control, five far-field microphones detect your voice from any direction, anywhere in the room.



SONOS • PLAYBAR SOUNDBAR & WIRELESS SPEAKER
This plug-and-play unit incorporates 9 integrated amplified speakers. Simply connect it to your TV with the supplied optical cable to deliver an epic home cinema sound in your own living room. PLAYBAR can also expand your existing Sonos system.



FOCAL • SIB EVO DOLBY ATMOS 5.1.2 SPEAKER PACKAGE
Enjoy Atmos sound effects worthy of cinemas, and created by Dolby when watching your favourite films at home. Your films will take on a new dimension!



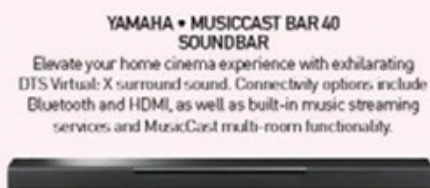
Q ACOUSTICS • M2 • SOUNDBASE
Delivers stunning TV and audio sound performance from its 80W amplifier, unique BMR™ wide dispersion sound technology and built-in subwoofer.



SONY • HT-ST5000 SOUNDBAR/SUB
The Sony HT-ST5000 Dolby Atmos Soundbar with Subwoofer features 7.1.2 channels, Hi-Res Audio and wireless streaming. Google Chromecast and Spotify Connect come built into this soundbar so you can enjoy music and movies as they were intended.



Q ACOUSTICS • 3050i CINEMA PACK 5.1 SPEAKER PACKAGE
The Q 3050i 5.1 Cinema Pack combines the very best of the 3000i Series to deliver truly a stunning home cinema system ensuring you hear every detail at its very best from your favourite music and movies.



YAMAHA • MUSICCAST BAR 40 SOUNDBAR
Elevate your home cinema experience with exhilarating DTS Virtual:X surround sound. Connectivity options include Bluetooth and HDMI, as well as built-in music streaming services and MusicCast multi-room functionality.



YAMAHA • YAS-207 SOUNDBAR/SUBWOOFER
Hard to hear the dialog? No more. With the YAS-207, you can hear it all. Fully dynamic, exceptionally clear sound - with a simple connection. What's more, a Clear Voice function brings the sound of narration and dialogue to the forefront, while keeping the overall sound quality intact.



SAMSUNG NEW QLED 8K

QE65Q900R • 65" 8K UHD TV

Perfect reality. Be the first to experience the new era with Samsung QLED 8K TV

The Q900R is Samsung's best TV to date that combines real 8K resolution with intelligent AI upscaling to ensure you can immerse yourself in the most incredibly lifelike picture. 8K resolution provides you with 4 times more detail than 4K, thereby offering more clarity than you have ever experienced before. Intelligent AI upscaling technology displays the content you love in 8K so that you can enjoy your favourite TV in a new level of clarity.

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SONY

KD-65AF9 • 65" OLED 4K UHD TV

See how Sony's latest OLED screen, processor and sound technologies come together for breathtaking 4K HDR TV entertainment. With over 8 million self-illuminating pixels, you'll see perfect blacks, incredible contrast and authentic colour in a blur-free image, with a wide viewing angle. Exclusive to Sony, specially designed actuators invisibly vibrate the TV panel to create amazing sound coming directly from the screen, for a perfect unification of audio and picture.

FREE 5 YEAR WARRANTY **4K HDR**

Also Available

55

LG OLED TV AI ThinQ

OLED55C8PLA • 55" OLED 4K UHD TV

Featuring LG's processor α9, an Intelligent Processor - Optimized for OLED TV, this exclusive processor allows for clean and sharp images with accurate colour and even more detailed HDR images. OLED pixels create an astonishingly accurate and wide colour range which is presented on the perfect black background only available from self-emitting pixels. LG TV can recognise major High Dynamic Range formats such as HLG, HDR 10, Dolby Vision™ and Technicolor. So you get the HDR experience, no matter what HDR entertainment you're enjoying.

Also Available **65 77** **FREE 5 YEAR WARRANTY**



WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2018
The Best OLED TV

LG OLED TV AI ThinQ

NEW



Panasonic 4K PRO HDR

TX-55FZ802 • 55" OLED 4K UHD TV

The FZ802 OLED Series brings Hollywood Grade Picture & Razor Sharp Style to your home. This elegantly designed TV is a picture powerhouse. It combines the peerless contrast capabilities of 4K HDR OLED screen technology with new Studio Colour HCX picture processing that's been tuned by a Hollywood colourist to ensure you always get to see pictures exactly how their creators intended. The FZ802 supports multiple HDR formats, such as HDR10, HDR10+ and Hybrid Log Gamma.

FREE 5 YEAR WARRANTY

OLED

Also Available

65

SONY

KD-65XF9005 • 65" 4K UHD TV



FREE 5 YEAR WARRANTY **4K HDR**

Also Available

49 55 75

ULTRA HD
Blu-ray



PANASONIC • DP-UB9000 • 4K UHD BLU-RAY PLAYER
4K UHD Blu-ray player supporting HDR10+, Dolby Vision HDR, Alexa and Google Assistant voice control (via a future software update), and 7.1 channel audio.

NEW

£849

ULTRA HD
Blu-ray



SONY • UBP-X700 • 4K UHD BLU-RAY PLAYER
Find yourself at the heart of every movie and series. 4K Ultra HD Blu-ray shows everything in finer detail than ever before, so you feel like you're seeing the real thing.

NEW

£649

ULTRA HD
Blu-ray



JVC • DLA-N5 • 4K D-ILA PROJECTOR
Capable of producing high-definition native 4K resolution images from its all-glass 65 mm diameter lens system. HDR10 content can be projected at optimum quality with Auto Tone Mapping function.

NEW

£6499

ULTRA HD
Blu-ray



PIONEER • UDP-LX500 • 4K UHD BLU-RAY PLAYER
Designed to satisfy videophiles and audiophiles alike, the UDP-LX500 offers state of the art playback of both Ultra HD Blu-rays and SACDs.

NEW

£999

ULTRA HD
Blu-ray



PIONEER • UDP-LX800 • 4K UHD BLU-RAY PLAYER
Flagship Universal Disc Player, purpose-engineered to provide a new state-of-the-art benchmark for 4K UHD Blu-ray and SACD playback.

NEW

£2199

ULTRA HD
Blu-ray



OPTOMA • UHD65 • 4K DLP PROJECTOR
This projector, incorporating Ultra HD 4K resolution, brings movies to life with thrilling detail, colour and contrast - taking entertainment to the next level.

NEW

£2999

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HI-FI AMPLIFIERS

THE BEATING HEART OF YOUR HI-FI SYSTEM

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Marantz PM6006 UK Edition £349

September 2018 ★★★★★

An already class-leading amplifier gets a few small, but telling, improvements that make it an even more compelling proposition.
Power 45W **Inputs** 4 line-in, MM, coax, 2 opt **Outputs** headphone

NEW
ENTRY



Onkyo A-9010 £200

Best stereo amplifier under £300, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

Our favourite budget amplifier, this is arguably the most entertaining affordable amp around. It is agile and has a wicked sense of rhythm.
Power 44W **Inputs** 5 line-in, MM **Outputs** speaker, headphone

AWARD
WINNER



NAD D 3020 V2 £399

September 2018 ★★★★★

A very likeable effort that features a full-bodied sonic performance with fine timing and dynamics and lots of useful features.
Power 30W **Inputs** MM, Bluetooth, Opt, Coax **Outputs** headphone

NEW
ENTRY



Cambridge Audio CXA60 £580

Awards 2016 ★★★★★

This is a lively performer with expressive dynamics and a surefooted sense of rhythm. The build quality is impressive too.
Power 60W **Inputs** 4 line-in **Outputs** Preamp, 2 x speaker, headphone



Rega Brio £600

Best stereo amplifier £300-£700, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

An upgrade on the Brio-R, this incredibly talented stereo amplifier offers a sound that's subtle, precise and engaging.
Power 50W **Inputs** 4 line-in **Outputs** 6.3mm, headphone, record

PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR



Rega Elex-R £900

Best stereo amplifier £700-£1500, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

Arguably the best-value amp Rega makes, with insight and a precise handling of rhythms that's hard to better even at double the price.
Power 72W **Inputs** 4 line-in, MM **Outputs** Speaker, preamp

AWARD
WINNER



Roksan K3 £1250

February 2015 ★★★★★

This lively effort from Roksan delivers a sound that's big, expressive and agile. It even performs capably on a Bluetooth connection.
Power 150W **Inputs** 5 line, MM, B'tooth **Outputs** Spkr, preamp, h'phone



Stereo amps up to £500

£500 to £1000

£1000 to
£1500



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£1000 to
£1500

Naim Nait 5si £1029

January 2015 ★★★★★

Naim's starter amp is an exceptionally polished performer which combines drama with the insight and subtlety to match the very best.
Power 60W **Inputs** 3 line-in **Outputs** speaker, headphone



AWARD
WINNER

Moon 240i £1990

Best stereo amplifier £1500-£2500, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

A gorgeous piece of kit that puts in a stunningly revealing and dynamic performance. The Moon 240i is in a class of its own.
Power 50W **Inputs** 2 RCA, MM, 2 Opt, 2 Coax **Outputs** RCA, 3.5mm



£1500 to £2000

Roksan Caspian M2 £1900

October 2013 ★★★★★

A supremely rounded product with solid build, classy aesthetics and a brilliant all-round sound that works well with all types of music.
Power 85W **Inputs** 5 line-in **Outputs** Speaker, preamp



£2000 to £4000

Lavardin ISx Reference £3890

November 2017 ★★★★★

The most informative, entertaining and musical integrated amplifier we've heard in years; it'll keep you listening for hours on end.
Power 50W **Inputs** 4 line



AWARD
WINNER

Roksan Blak £2800

Best stereo amplifier £2500+, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

A well equipped all-rounder with a powerful and energetic sound. It's happy to work with a wide range of systems and musical genres too.
Power 150W **Inputs** Balanced XLR, RCA x 3, USB, MM, aptX B'tooth



£4000 and above

Luxman L-509X £8500

June 2018 ★★★★★

Much more than an expensive retro throwback; its blend of build, features and performance is hard to better at this price.
Power 120W **Inputs** Line x 6 **Outputs** Headphone, preamp



Audio Research GSi75 £14,500

April 2017 ★★★★★

This can stand toe-to-toe with the finest pre/power combos at this price; it's a well equipped one-box solution for high-end purists.
Power 75W **Inputs** Line x 3, MM, MC, USB **Outputs** Speaker, h'phone



Leema Tucana II Anniversary Edition £4995

March 2017 ★★★★★

It looks no different to its 2010 incarnation, but this remains a top-class amp that works across a wide range of systems and music.
Power 150W **Inputs** Line x 7 **Outputs** Speaker, preamp



Preamp and power amps

GamuT D3i £6150

January 2015 ★★★★★

This GamuT D3i is a brilliant performer with excellent detail and superb transparency. It isn't packed with inputs, but will cope with most set-ups.
Inputs Line x 3 **Output** Balanced, single-ended **DAC** No



Burmester 956 Mk2 £8440

January 2017 ★★★★★

Paired with the 099 preamp, this impeccably built power amp offers a smooth, engaging and full-bodied sound that needs to be heard.
Power output 115W **Mono/Stereo** Stereo **Inputs** XLR



GamuT D200i £8500

January 2015 ★★★★★

The D200i combines transparency, muscle and agility better than any alternative we've heard. Build and finish are excellent.

Power output 220W **Mono/Stereo** **Inputs** Phono, XLR



Burmester 808 MK5 £22,242

February 2013 ★★★★★

Burmester's masterpiece may be decades old but a string of upgrades have kept it relevant. Sound quality remains exceptional.

Inputs Line, MM, MC (opt) **Outputs** Balanced, single-ended **DAC** No



Nagra Classic Pre/Power amp £25,500

August 2018 ★★★★★

Rivals have more muscle, but once in full flow the Nagra lets the music take centre stage. One of the finest pre/powers money can buy.

Power 100W **Inputs** Line x 5, Phono, XLR



Preamplifier and power amps

CD PLAYERS & TRANSPORTS

GET THE RIGHT PLAYER AND CD CAN STILL SHINE

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whf.cm/BBCDPlayers

Cambridge Audio CXC £350

Awards 2015 ★★★★★

If you already have a DAC (the CXC is useless without one) we wouldn't hesitate in recommending this transport over a standalone CD player.

Type CD transport **Outputs** Coaxial, optical



Marantz CD6006 UK Edition £450

Best CD player under £1000, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

The new king of the midrange market. The CD6006UK shows plenty of skill with detail, dynamics and clarity. A great player for the money.

Type CD player **Outputs** Coaxial, optical, RCA, headphone, USB

PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR



Onkyo C-N7050 £400

April 2015 ★★★★★

A CD player or a hi-res music streamer? Whatever it is, the C-N7050 is a hugely appealing system that combines the best of both worlds.

Type CD player/streamer **Outputs** Optical, coaxial, line level



Cyrus CD t £845

Awards 2015 ★★★★★

An exceptionally talented transport, the CD t offers a level of insight, transparency and clarity you'd struggle to find elsewhere at this price.

Type CD transport **Outputs** Coaxial, optical



Cyrus CDi £1100

Best CD player £1000+, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

Cyrus says this player is its best-sounding yet, and after listening to how confident and entertaining it sounds, it's hard to disagree.

Type CD player **Outputs** Coaxial, optical, RCA

AWARD
WINNER



Naim CD5si £1100

October 2014 ★★★★★

The CD5si boasts a full-bodied, winningly enthusiastic approach to music. The absence of digital outputs means there's no upgrade path.

Type CD player **Outputs** RCA, DIN



Up to £500

£500 to
£1000

£1000 to £1500

£1000 to
£1500**Roksan K3 CD Di £1300**

November 2015 ★★★★★

Few players at this price are as musical as the K3 CD Di. It promotes the character of your music, so you'll never tire of listening to it.

Type CD player **Outputs** Coax, opt, XLR, RCA **Inputs** Coax, opt



£1500 to £2000

Roksan Caspian M2 CD £1900

Awards 2010 ★★★★★

The Caspian M2 CD has been around the block, but is showing few signs of its age. It combines skill with timing, dynamics and authority.

Type CD player **Outputs** Coaxial, optical, USB, XLR, RCA

**Burmester 956 Mk2 £8440**

January 2017 ★★★★★

Paired with the 099 preamp, this impeccably built power amp offers a smooth, engaging and full-bodied sound that needs to be heard.

Power output 115W **Mono/Stereo** Stereo **Inputs** XLR



£2000 and above

Chord Blu MkII £7995

January 2018 ★★★★★

The most informative and enjoyable sound we've heard from the CD format. Partner it with the DAVE and we doubt you can do better.

Type CD transport **Outputs** Coaxial x 2 **Inputs** Coaxial, USB

**Marantz SA-10 £6000**

April 2018 ★★★★★

One of the best digital source components around. Its unfussy disposition allows it to sound at home across a wide range of systems.

Type CD player **Outputs** Coaxial, optical



DACs

A DIGITAL-TO-ANALOGUE CONVERTER IS A MODERN HI-FI MUST

View offers
whf.cm/BBDACs

Up to £200

Audioquest DragonFly Red £170

Best USB DAC £150+, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

A more expensive alternative to the DragonFly Black, this is a marked improvement over the original, sounding more sophisticated and subtler.

Inputs USB **Size** 6 x 2 x 1cm **Resolution** Up to 24-bit/96kHz

AWARD
WINNER**Cyrus soundKey £100**

Best USB DAC under £150, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

An affordable, compact DAC that turns mobile listening into an authentic high-fidelity experience. iOS users may find connectivity a little inelegant.

Inputs micro-USB **Size** 2 x 5 x 1mm **Resolution** Up to 24-bit/96kHz

AWARD
WINNER

£200 to £500

Chord Mojo £400

Best DAC under £500, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

The majority of the £1400 Hugo's performance for a fraction of the price. An enthusiastic performer that stays refined and superbly balanced.

Inputs USB, opt, coax **Size** 2 x 6 x 8cm **Res** 32-768kHz/DSD 512

AWARD
WINNER**Oppo HA-2 SE £290**

Awards 2016 ★★★★★

A minor upgrade but a good one. The SE costs more than the DragonFly, but offers more features to go with its clear, agile and detailed sound.

Inputs USB, 3.5mm **Size** 140 x 70 x 120mm **Res** to 384kHz, 16/24/32-bit



Audiolab M-DAC £600

June 2015 ★★★★★

A good desktop alternative to the Chord Mojo, with plenty more sockets and features. Smooth balance, fluid dynamics and subtle detail.

Inputs USB, opt, coax **Size** 6 x 25 x 25cm **Res** Up to 24-bit/192kHz



£500 to £1000

Audiolab M-DAC+ £800

August 2016 ★★★★★

Audiolab's follow up to the M-DAC gets a great deal right with a sound that's neat, tidy and expansive. The M-DAC+ demands your attention.

Inputs 2x coax, opt x2 **Size** 11 x 25 x 29cm **Res** Up to 32-bit/384kHz



Chord Hugo 2 £1800

Best DAC £1000+, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

The Hugo 2 has a hefty price tag but, at this level, there isn't another DAC near that can communicate so unambiguously or so effortlessly.

Inputs Opt, coax, USB, B'tooth **Size** 2 x 10 x 13cm **Res** 32-bit/768kHz

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR



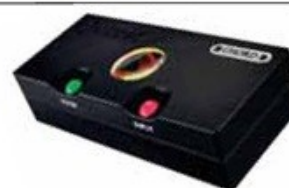
£1000 to £2000

Chord Qute £1195

May 2018 ★★★★★

As with the 2Qute, the Qute is a superior DAC which sets a new benchmark at this price with its clear and precise performance.

Inputs 2x coax, opt, USB **Size** 4 x 16 x 7cm **Res** 32-bit/768kHz PCM/DSD512



Benchmark DAC3 HGC £2350

May 2017 ★★★★★

It may not make a great first impression, but give it time and you'll find this well-equipped DAC is one of the finest-sounding at this price.

Inputs 2x coax, 2x opt, 2x RCA **Size** 5 x 25 x 24cm **Res** Up to 24-bit/192kHz



£2000 to £3000

DACs: everything you need to know

Read more at...
www.whathifi.com/advice



Got digital music? Of course you have. So here's what you need to know with regards to your digital-to-analogue converter

What is a DAC? What does it do?

Digital audio data can be stored in a variety of sample rates, bit depths, encoding and compression formats – and it is the DAC's job to make sense of it all, translating it as accurately as possible from its binary format to return it as close to the original analogue recording.

Why do I need a separate DAC?

Not all DACs are created equal. They might not support all file data rates. Also, poor converters can introduce unwanted noise during playback, not to mention add extra distortion due to jitter.

The rise of the asynchronous DAC has seen it take over timing duties from any computer for just this reason. The digital clocks found in dedicated hi-fi DACs tend to be more accurate, so usually the conversion process will be performed more faithfully.

The source material is all

You need to start out with good source material. You'll hear optimum results with CD-quality

content and above, which is best stored in FLAC, WAV or ALAC (Mac) lossless PCM formats, or alternatively DSD if you prefer.

DSD and PCM

DSD, or Direct Stream Digital, is an alternative to PCM. It differs by offering a bit depth of just one, but much higher sampling rates - DSD64 at 2.8 MHz and DSD128 at 5.6 MHz. If you're in the DSD camp, it's worth checking if the DAC you're looking at supports it as not all do.

What type of DAC is right for you?

Compact USB DACs offer portability and convenience at a reasonable price. Some are no bigger than a standard USB stick (such as the Audioquest DragonFly Black) and others are pocket-sized units that connect via a separate USB cable (Oppo's HA-2 SE). They largely keep connections simple, with just a headphone socket and possibly a line-level output for hooking up to powered speakers or a hi-fi system.

If you need more connectivity and are not interested in portability, a desktop USB unit - such as the Audiolab M-DAC - might be more suitable. These require their own power source, but offer several additional digital or analogue

audio inputs alongside a USB input for connecting to your computer. Keep an eye out for a headphone amp if you want to use headphones.

Finally, there are the DACs designed to work as part of a bigger home audio system. These will usually have even more inputs – particularly more niche sockets such as AES/EBU – and, potentially, more features too. They'll support high-resolution music formats or offer Bluetooth connectivity. Some even come with volume control, so they can be used as a pre-amp too. These can range from the sensible Audiolab M-DAC Plus (£800) to the uber-retro Benchmark DAC3 HGC (£2350), or the extravagant Chord DAVE (£7995).



£2000 to £10,000

Copland DAC 215 £2000

January 2017 ★★★★★

A versatile DAC that can be used as a preamp. This understated effort is hugely talented and has an open, clean and precise presentation.
Inputs RCA, USB, opt, coax **Size** 12 x 20 x 28cm **Res** Up to 32-bit/384kHz



Chord DAVE £8000

Awards 2016 ★★★★★

The uniquely-named DAVE costs a lot, but we'd argue it's the best DAC money can buy. Build quality is excellent and the sound is very special.
Inputs Coax x2, opt x 2, XLR **Size** 6 x 34 x 15cm **Res** Up to 768kHz



£3000 and above

dCS Rossini DAC/Rossini Master Clock £22,610

July 2018 ★★★★★

An expensive DAC/clock combination that justifies its price tag with a performance of exceptional detail, organisation and fine dynamics. **Inputs** Coax x 2, opt x 2, USB x 2 **Size** 7 x 45 x 44cm **Res** Up to 24-bit/384kHz



Nagra HD DAC/MPS £23,600

September 2018 ★★★★★

An effort that boasts a natural, fluid and informative sound. If you're in the market for the ultimate DAC, this would certainly be a frontrunner.
Inputs Coax x 2, Opt, AES/EBU x 2, USB **Size** 8 x 28 x 35cm



MUSIC STREAMERS

THE BEST WAY TO SHARE YOUR TUNES AROUND THE HOUSE

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whf.cm/BBMusicStreamers

Up to £100

Google Chromecast Audio £30

Best music streamer under £100, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

Google turns its expertise to audio streaming to bring music from any Cast-compatible app to your amps and speakers for a super-low price.
DLNA Yes **Inputs** RCA, 3.5mm, optical **Storage** No



£100 to £500

Arcam rPlay £380

Best music streamer £100-£500, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

Another in a long line of useful and affordable add-ons from Arcam, the rPlay introduces a myriad of streaming solutions to a hi-fi system.
DLNA Yes **Outputs** Coaxial, analogue x2 **Storage** No



Pioneer N-50A £380

Awards 2016 ★★★★★

The impressive N-50A offers an insightful performance, and can pluck music over DLNA and Internet radio, or via its many inputs.
DLNA Yes **Inputs** Optical, coaxial, USB **Storage** No



£500 to £1000

Cambridge Audio CXN £800

Best music streamer £500-£1000, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

Building on the success of Cambridge's Award-winning Stream Magic 6 v2, the CXN features an all-new design and improved sound.
DLNA Yes **Inputs** Optical, coaxial, USB x3 **Storage** No



£1000 to £2000

Cambridge Audio Azur 851N £1400

Best music streamer £1000-£1500, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

A sterling streamer that boasts excellent file support, plenty of connections and a sound that's both expressive and dynamic.
DLNA Yes **Inputs** Optical x2, coaxial x2, USB x3, ethernet **Storage** No



Moon Neo MiND £1700

Best music streamer £1500-£2000, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

An elegant performer that delivers the kind of musical finesse we rarely hear at this price. You'll need to factor in the cost of a DAC.

DLNA Yes Inputs aptX, AES/EBU, S/PDIF, Toslink Storage No

AWARD
WINNER£1000 to
£2000**Naim NAC-N272 £3470**

November 2016 ★★★★★

A talented unit that combines a capable preamp with a terrific music streamer, it delivers a top-class sound with an extensive feature list.

DLNA Yes Inputs Line x3, coaxial x3, optical x3 Storage No



£2000 to £5000

Naim ND5 XS £2430

Awards 2016 ★★★★★

A forward-thinking design from an established hi-fi company. A brilliant sonic performance and a must-have if you're after a do-it-all streamer.

DLNA Yes Inputs USB, coaxial, optical Storage No

**Burmester Musiccenter 151 £12,500**

August 2015 ★★★★★

This multi-talented machine is a streamer, server, CD player and ripper, all wrapped in one superbly made chrome-laden box.

DLNA Yes Inputs optical, coaxial, USB Storage 4TB



£5000 and above

Linn Klimax DS3 £15,800

February 2017 ★★★★★

If you want the finest-sounding music streamer on the market and aren't afraid of the heavyweight price, then invest your money here.

DLNA Yes Inputs n/a Storage No

**Naim NDS/555PS £13,960**

December 2012 ★★★★★

Once you hear what this monster of a streaming machine can do, there's no going back. If you can afford it, lucky you!

DLNA Yes Inputs 2 x coaxial, optical Storage No



RADIOS

ONE OF THE OLDEST ENTERTAINMENT TECHS, STILL GOING STRONG

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whf.cm/BBDABRadios**Pure Evoke H2 £100**

Best radio under £100, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

Pure's latest radio is similar to its previous incarnation, but more refined. The H2 improves on the D2's already-sophisticated sound.

Battery No Size (hwd) 18 x 12 x 12cm Inputs Mini-USB, 3.5mm

AWARD
WINNER

"Once you've listened to it, there's no doubt this Pure is an upgrade over the D2"

Revo SuperSignal £180

August 2016 ★★★★★

A stylish radio with plenty of features, it's even more impressive on the audio front thanks to a large-scale sound that belies its appearance.

Battery No Size (hwd) 21 x 14 x 14cm Inputs 3.5mm, AUX in, B'tooth



"Its ability to fill a medium-sized room is not to be understated"

Revo SuperConnect £280

Best radio £200+, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

Not just a radio, this feature-packed Revo is a streaming music player that will play just about anything from nearly any source.

Battery No Size (hwd) 18 x 27 x 12cm Inputs 3.5mm, Bluetooth, DLNA

AWARD
WINNER

"Design, ease of use, and sound quality – the Revo has it all"

Up to £200

£200 and
above

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& DALI speakers (pair)
PM6006 UK Edition, CD6006
UK Edition & SPEKTOR 2 (black)

Marantz PM6006 UK Edition: "Full bodied, tonally balanced and easy on the ear, a class-leading amplifier." – What Hi-Fi?

Marantz CD6006 UK Edition: "Fine build and finish with great detail, dynamics and clarity. This CD player extends the brand's long-running golden streak." – What Hi-Fi?

"Excellent speakers, combining DALI's traditional strengths with a generous dose of entertainment. If you're looking for a top-class pair of budget standmounters, your choice just got bigger." – What Hi-Fi? on the SPEKTOR 2

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SAVE
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6 Year Supercare 10% of PM6006 UK & CD6006 UK purchase price
Speakers & separates also available in other finishes



WHAT HI-FI?
AWARDS 2018

Best speakers
Under £1000
Best Speaker 2

WHAT HI-FI?
AWARDS 2018

CD players
Best CD player under £1000
Marantz CD6006 UK Edition

WHAT HI-FI?
AWARDS 2018

Best amplifiers
Best amplifier under £1000
Marantz PM6006 UK Edition

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Denon mini system
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see web

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Compatible speakers available from £49 per pair

WHAT HI-FI?
AWARDS 2018

Trusted
Reviews

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Monitor Audio speakers (pair)
Bronze 2 (walnut)

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Audiolab CD transport 6000CDT (black)

Flawless digital signal that will please every music lover. Extremely robust and reliable, it uses a read-ahead digital buffer to reduce disc-reading failures, so you can enjoy more of your scratched CDs.

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Save £100 on any speakers over £500, when bought with this amp and CD player. Ask in-store or via Telesales for details.

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Audiolab amplifier 6000A (black)

"Clear, refined, articulate sound with big, spacious presentation – a hugely capable stereo amplifier that's good enough to worry the best in class."
– What Hi-Fi?

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Sony Bluetooth over-ear noise-cancelling headphones WH1000XM3 (black)

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**WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★**

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Mission speakers (pair) QX2 (black wood)

£399

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★★★★★**

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DALI speakers (pair) OBERON 5 (white)

£699

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**WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★**

Also available in other finishes



Chord Electronics DAC Qutest

£1195

**WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★**

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Selected stores



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Cambridge Audio network streamer 851N (silver)

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**SAVE
£100**

**WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★**

Non-VIP price £1399
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Roksan amplifier Blak

£2800

**WHAT HI-FI?
★★★★★**

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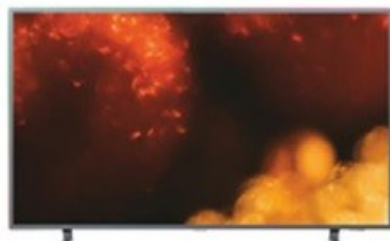
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Best OLED TV

high FIVE
BEST IN CLASS

Staff
★★★★★

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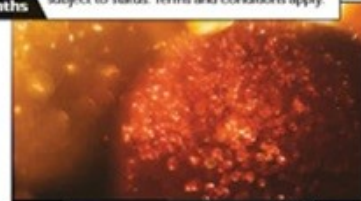
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Trusted Reviews
Status

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UHD40

"Colours are vivid, yet realistic; there's lashings of detail and motion remains silky smooth. There's no other way to say it: the Optoma UHD40 is a simply outstanding projector." – What Hi-Fi?

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Denon Atmos AV receiver AVR3500H

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£899

6 Year Supercare £89.90

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Best Soundbar

EXETERNS
HIGHLY
RECOMMENDED

Trusted
Reviews
RECOMMENDED

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IDEAL
GIFT



Sony Atmos AV receiver STRDN1080

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6 Year Supercare £42.90

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under £500

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AWARDS 2018
Best Soundbar

STUFF
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Panasonic 4K UHD Premium Blu-ray player DPUB9000

"A seriously capable machine for home cinema enthusiasts, this player will help bring the best out of any 4K Blu-ray collection." – What Hi-Fi?

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6 Year Supercare £84.90

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PRODUCT

WHAT HI-FI?
AWARDS 2018
Best Blu-ray Player

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Dawn, Manager,
Uchfield store,
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Hugh, Deputy Manager, Weybridge store.
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richersounds
Experience Better

£200 and above

Roberts Stream 94i £200

March 2018 ★★★★★

Sets the bar even higher than its predecessor, adding Bluetooth without compromising its sound and offering a plenty of features.

Battery Opt Size (hwd) 26 x 17 x 13cm **Inputs** 3.5mm, USB, B'tooth

"The Stream 94i is the complete package, making it the best radio at this price"

STEREO SPEAKERS

THEY BRING THE MUSIC TO YOUR EARS – SO CHOOSE WITH CARE

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Desktop speakers

KEF Egg £350

Awards 2016 ★★★★★

Our 2015 Best Desktop Speaker Over £200 have a distinctive design and flexible connectivity – and a stunning, consistent performance.

Size (hwd) 27 x 13 x 17cm **Powered** Yes **Finishes** 3

"Thankfully, sound quality is good whether you listen to them up close or from across the room"

Ruark Audio MR1 Mk2 £330

Best desktop speaker, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

Gorgeous retro design and superb sound make the Mk2s an update that manages to be even more appealing than its predecessor.

Size (hwd) 17 x 13 x 14cm **Powered** Yes **Finishes** 1

"Quite simply, these are superb speakers of their type"

Tannoy Eclipse 3 £300

Best floorstander under £400, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

A speaker that's easy to set up and partner, this is the most talented budget floorstander we've heard in years.

Size (hwd) 96 x 27 x 29cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 1

"The Threes turn in a musically engaging performance that compares to the best at this price"

Fyne Audio F302 £400

July 2018 ★★★★★

The superlative F302s' full-bodied presentation and low-end presence make this another easy recommendation for this brand.

Size (hwd) 93 x 19 x 27cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 3

"A speaker that belies its extremely reasonable price tag at every turn"

Q Acoustics 3050 £470

Best floorstander £400-£800, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

Another 2015 Award-winner, and no wonder. The powerful 3050s are so talented, they give speakers closer to £1000 a run for their money.

Size (hwd) 100 x 20 x 30cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 5

"Hats off to Q Acoustics: these speakers are another staggering achievement"

Dali Zensor 5 AX £800

April 2017 ★★★★★

An excellent, convenient 'simply-add-source' pair of speakers. You'll need to be careful with partnering to get the best from them though.

Size (hwd) 83 x 16 x 28cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 3

"We liked the Zensors when we first heard them, but by the end of our time with them, we loved them"

B&W 683 S2 £1150

October 2014 ★★★★★

Tremendously talented speakers. We're impressed by their power, scale and delicacy – they're wonderfully versatile performers.

Size (hwd) 99 x 19 x 36cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 2

"Among the best floorstanders we've heard at this price"

Fyne Audio F501 £1200

June 2018 ★★★★★

Another thrillingly accomplished effort from Fyne. Partner them well and they'll deliver a detailed, revealing and confident sound.

Size (hwd) 98 x 20 x 32cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 2

"The F501s are an extremely confident calling-card"

Floorstanders up to £1000

£1000 to £2000

Monitor Audio Silver 200 £1000

Best floorstander £800-£1200, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

The latest generation of Silver speakers bring a sense of fun that was lacking in previous efforts. They are great all-round performers.

Size (hwd) 88 x 16 x 24cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 6



"Design, ease of use, and sound quality – the Revo has it all"

Neat Iota Alpha £1385

Best floorstander £1200-£2000, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

If you want fuss-free floorstanders that don't dominate the room, then there are few better alternatives than this entertaining effort from Neat.

Size (hwd) 45 x 20 x 16cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 4



"Design, ease of use, and sound quality – the Revo has it all"

ProAc Response DT8 £1950

November 2018 ★★★★★

Deliver such an entertaining sound, we can't help but recommend them. Take a bit of care with system-matching and they will impress.

Size (hwd) 98 x 20 x 23cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 5 (plus 2 specials)



"The Stream 94i is the complete package, making it the best radio at this price"

PMC Twenty5.23 £2970

Awards 2016 ★★★★★

PMC has created a terrific pair of floorstanding speakers. Match them with a suitably talented system and they will sing.

Size (hwd) 91 x 16 x 33cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 4



"If you're looking for top class, compact floorstanders, we can't think of a better alternative"

Spendor A4 £2195

Best floorstanders £2000+, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

The A4s combine Spendor's traditional strengths with a generous dose of entertainment. At this price, they're one of the few we'd recommend.

Size (hwd) 83 x 17 x 28cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 3



"Design, ease of use, and sound quality – the Revo has it all"

Q Acoustics Concept 500 £4000

January 2018 ★★★★★

One of the most impressive high-end speakers we've heard in recent years, these offer insight, great bass and wide-ranging dynamics.

Size (hwd) 115 x 40 x 35cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 2



"Capable of a performance that strongly challenges alternatives up to twice the price"

Spendor A7 £2995

October 2018 ★★★★★

The A7s continue Spendor's knack for combining precision, clarity and subtlety with hugely enjoyable dynamics and rhythm

Size (hwd) 94 x 18 x 31cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 4



"Design, ease of use, and sound quality – the Revo has it all"

Neat Iota Xplorer £3500

September 2018 ★★★★★

The Xplorers are another odd-looking pair of speakers from Neat, but they have a way of delivering music that's truly spellbinding.

Size (hwd) 74 x 30 x 22cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 4



"If it's all about the music for you, as opposed to absolute sonic transparency, give these Neats a serious listen"

Sonus Faber Venere S £4800

March 2017 ★★★★★

There are more analytical alternatives available, but there are few that deliver music in such an appealing manner. Impressively musical.

Size (hwd) 124 x 39 x 48cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 3



"There are few speakers that manage to deliver music in such an appealing manner"

ATC SCM40A £6280

April 2014 ★★★★★

The price looks steep but factor in built-in amplification and exceptional sound, and the SCM40As emerge as something of a high-end bargain.

Size (hwd) 98 x 37 x 34cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 2 **Powered** Yes



"Once up and running, these ATCs are deeply impressive speakers"

£1000 to £2000

£2000 to £3000

£3000 to £5000

£5000 to £10,000

£5,000 to
£10,000**Tannoy Kensington GR £9950**

August 2015 ★★★★★

Along with that traditional appearance comes real substance. These are gentle giants, balancing finesse with force in a mighty appealing way.

Size (hwd) 110 x 41 x 34cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 2



"There's enough sonic quality to place them on the top rung of speakers at this price"

£10,000
and above**JBL K2 S9900 £44,000**

Best Temptation, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

A fantastic pair of speakers that deliver a spellbinding mix of dynamics, insight and finesse. Among the best speakers money can buy.

Size (hwd) 120 x 56 x 35cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 2

PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR

"They charm and thrill. They make us happy or sad as the music demands. We can't get enough of them"

Standmounts up to £200

Dali Spektor 1 £160

March 2018 ★★★★★

A small speaker that inherits all the Spektor 2's good traits, pumping out an energetic and entertaining sound for an affordable price.

Size (hwd) 24 x 14 x 20cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 2



"If you're looking for really small budget speakers, buy these"

Mission LX-2 £160

Awards 2016 ★★★★★

Mission's most convincing speaker in quite some time, the LX-2s are one of the best budget speakers you can buy.

Size (hwd) 31 x 19 x 25cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 1



"Partner these Missions with a bit of care and they're as entertaining a budget box as we've heard in years"

£200 to £500

Dali Spektor 2 £200

Best standmount speaker under £200, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

The '2' combines Dali's traditional strengths with a generous dose of entertainment that even Mission and Q Acoustics struggle to match.

Size (hwd) 17 x 28 x 28cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 2

AWARD
WINNER

"The way these speakers handle dynamics is impressive"

Q Acoustics 3020i £249

September 2018 ★★★★★

Similar to the 3010i in both physical and sonic design, the 3020is improve by adding a little more scale, size, dynamic reach and detail.

Size (hwd) 26 x 17 x 23cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 4



"They keep Q Acoustics firmly among the cream of crop of budget-speaker makers"

Monitor Audio Bronze 2 £280

Best standmount speaker £200-£400, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

For their size, these Monitor Audio Bronze 2s dig deep in the bass. They're tonally balanced and impressively detailed too.

Size (hwd) 35 x 19 x 26cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 4

AWARD
WINNER

"They are hugely talented performers, but it takes a little while to appreciate how good they are"

Dynaudio Emit M20 £600

Awards 2016 ★★★★★

Another pair of entertaining standmounters from Dynaudio, the M20s combine sweeping dynamics with bags of insight.

Size (hwd) 36 x 22 x 27cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 2



"Unlike some speakers that favour certain music genres, the Emit 20s are game for everything"

£500 to £1000

KEF Q350 £530

Best standmount speaker £400-£800, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

KEF has delivered a speaker that's a cut above the rest, with a sophisticated, insightful presentation that belies its modest price.

Size (hwd) 36 x 21 x 31cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 2

PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR

"The Q350s display a level of clarity and subtlety unheard of at this price"

Monitor Audio Silver 100 £650

April 2018 ★★★★★

Another superlative speaker from Monitor Audio's Silver range. Its clear, bold presentation and punchy sound set it apart from the pack.

Size (hwd) 38 x 23 x 33cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 6



"Nailing a recording's ambience is high on the Silvers' 'to-do' list, but at no point do we feel we're sacrificing resolution"

Quad S-1 £500

July 2016 ★★★★★

They're only small, but the S-1s are smooth, intimate and insightful – especially in the midrange – as well as being a sight for sore eyes.

Size (hwd) 29 x 16 x 24cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 2



"Tonal balance is good, with no part of the frequency range sticking out to distract"

£500 to
£1000

Acoustic Energy AE1 Active £1000

June 2018 ★★★★★

An active speaker that delivers punch, drive and rhythmic ability.

It outperforms plenty of more expensive hi-fi components.

Size (hwd) 30 x 19 x 25cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 3



"Simply put, these AE1s do everything they do with a flourish"

ATC SCM11 (2013) £1300

Best standmount speaker £1200-£2000, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

These are the most talented standmounters anywhere near this price. The transparency of their sound compares with far more expensive rivals.

Size (hwd) 38 x 21 x 25cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 2 **Powered** Yes

AWARD
WINNER



"When it comes to speakers, there are few better ways to spend your money"

Dynaudio Xeo 2 £1200

Best active speaker, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

A pair of hi-fi speakers that are much more than they appear. Bluetooth, hi-res support and a versatile sound make this a formidable package.

Size (hwd) 26 x 17 x 15cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 2

AWARD
WINNER



"Versatile, easy to house and packing a hugely accomplished sound worthy of their asking price"

Neat Motive SX3 £1045

November 2015 ★★★★★

If you're tight on space, or don't need an overpowering sound, these articulate, fun-loving speakers should be a shoo-in for your shortlist.

Size (hwd) 33 x 16 x 20cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 4



"The real pinnacle of the Motive SX3s' talents is their true devotion to having a good time"

Revel Concerta2 M16 £1000

Best standmount speaker £800-£1200, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

One of the best speakers we've heard below the £1000 mark.

Make sure to partner well to get the best out of them.

Size (hwd) 37 x 22 x 27cm **Bi-wire** n/a **Finishes** n/a

AWARD
WINNER



"They pound out crescendos with relish, refusing to harden up or compress, even at high volume levels"

ATC SCM19 £1995

Awards 2016 ★★★★★

It's quite a trick for a speaker to be highly analytical with music, yet never sound clinical or passionless. But so it is with the SCM19s.

Size (hwd) 44 x 27 x 30cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 2



"We like the SCM19s' ability to render a large soundstage and populate it with well focused instruments"

Dynaudio Special Forty £2500

Best standmount speaker £2000+, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

When paired with talented electronics, these standmounters will shine, offering a confident, muscular and subtle sound. Lots of fun.

Size (hwd) 36 x 20 x 32cm **Bi-wire** No **Finishes** 2

AWARD
WINNER



"They sound far bigger and more authoritative than a 36cm-high speaker has any right to"

Totem Sky £1800

August 2017 ★★★★★

A hugely enjoyable listen, delivering one of the most musically convincing presentations we've heard anywhere near this price.

Size (hwd) 31 x 16 x 23cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 3



"These speakers excel at communicating the changing momentum of a song"

Spendor Classic 2/3 £3295

August 2018 ★★★★★

They have their predecessor's easy-going nature, as well as the punch and rhythmic precision to work well with a wide range of music.

Size (hwd) 54 x 27 x 34cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 2



"We can't think of a better all-round alternative at this price level"

£1000 to £1500

£1500 to £3000

£3000 and
above

£3000 and above

KEF Reference 1 £5000

July 2018 ★★★★★

These are superb all-rounders that work well across a wide range of music, systems and rooms. The dedicated stands are pricey though.

Size (hwd) 44 x 21 x 43cm **Bi-wire** Yes **Finishes** 3



"Rather than excel in a few specific areas, they perform well across the board"

SYSTEMS

SIMPLE DOESN'T HAVE TO MEAN LOWER QUALITY

View offers
whf.cm/BBHifiSystems

Multi-room

Sonos System From £175

Best multi-room system under £500, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

If you don't need hi-res, Sonos is an obvious choice for multi-room.

A great user experience alongside a full-bodied, insightful sound.

Res 16-bit/44.1kHz **App** Mac, Android **Formats** MP3, iTunes Plus, WMA

AWARD WINNER

**Audio Pro System From £630**

April 2018 ★★★★★

Audio Pro's multi-room system is not the most advanced, but no other system makes more sound-per-pound sense than this one. **Res** 24-bit/192kHz

App iOS, Android **Formats** MP3, AAC, WMA, FLAC, ALAC



Stereo systems up to £500

Denon D-M41DAB £400

Best microsystem, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

Denon hasn't rested on its laurels. It's managed to better the M40, delivering improved sound and functionality. The best just got better.

Inputs Analogue & digital **Sources** B'tooth, CD, streaming, DAB, FM

AWARD WINNER

**Tangent Ampster X4 £300**

November 2016 ★★★★★

This is a quality entry-level mini system, perfect for anyone who wants to start building a system with a greater scope. Terrifically entertaining.

Inputs Analogue & digital **Sources** Bluetooth, streaming



£500 to £1000

Revo SuperSystem £550

Best all-in-one system under £1000, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

An all-in-one system that exudes quality, this Revo features great sonic performance and terrific retro looks. It's a talented system.

Inputs Analogue & digital **Sources** Streaming, internet, Bluetooth

AWARD WINNER



£1000 to £2000

Arcam Solo Music £1300

Awards 2016 ★★★★★

The Swiss Army Knife of hi-fi/home cinema systems, the third gen Solo is a well featured, fine-sounding product. The benchmark at this price.

Inputs Analogue & digital **Sources** Streaming, CD, DAB/DAB+/FM



£2000 and above

KEF LS50 Wireless £2000

Best all-in-one system £1000+, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

More than active versions of the LS50s, the LS50 Wirelesses deliver the performance of traditional hi-fi system in a neat and brilliant package.

Inputs Analogue & digital **Sources** Bluetooth, Tidal

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR





BIG AWARD WINNERS 2018

SYSTEMS



**BEST HI-FI SYSTEM
OVER £1000**
NAIM UNITI ATOM



BEST TURNTABLE SYSTEM
PRO-JECT JUKE BOX E



BEST MICRO SYSTEM
DENON D-M41DAB



BEST ALL-IN-ONE SYSTEM
KEF LS50 WIRELESS

STEREO SPEAKERS



**BEST STANDMOUNT
SPEAKER £200-£350**
MONITOR AUDIO BRONZE 2



**BEST FLOORSTANDING
SPEAKER UNDER £500**
FYNE AUDIO F302



**BEST STANDMOUNT
SPEAKER £500-£750**
KEF Q350



**BEST FLOORSTANDING
SPEAKER £1000-£1500**
FYNE AUDIO F501

HOME CINEMA AMPS

**BEST HOME CINEMA
AMPLIFIER UNDER £500**
SONY STR-DN1080



**BEST HOME CINEMA
AMPLIFIER £500-£1500**
DENON AVR-X3500H

**BEST HOME CINEMA
AMPLIFIER OVER £1500**
DENON AVC-X6500H



TVS & SOUNDBARS



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Mon - Sat: 10am - 6pm

0191 285 7179

Moon Neo Ace £2500

October 2016 ★★★★★

The Ace has all you'd ever need from a piece of modern hi-fi, a versatile all-in-one system that puts music enjoyment at the top of its list.

Inputs Analogue & digital **Sources** Streaming, aptX Bluetooth

**Naim Uniti Nova £4200**

January 2018 ★★★★★

It's a lot of money to pay for a system, but the Nova is as complete and convincing an argument for one-box convenience you're likely to hear.

Inputs Analogue & digital **Sources** Chromecast, Bluetooth, Tidal

**Naim Uniti Star £3499**

November 2018 ★★★★★

The Uniti Star is a great addition to Naim's streaming system range – and if you need CD replay, it's the obvious choice

Inputs Analogue & digital **Sources** CD, UPnP streaming, Bluetooth

NEW ENTRY



TURNTABLES

DECKS TO KEEP THE VINYL REVIVAL THRIVING

View offers
whf.cm/BBTurntables**Audio Technica AT-LP3 £200**

Best turntable under £200, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

A fully automatic turntable that doesn't scrimp on performance, this is the ideal entry-level deck for those looking to dip their 'vinyl toes' in.

Speed 33½ & 45rpm **Size (hwd)** 13 x 44 x 35cm

AWARD WINNER

**Pro-Ject Essential III £240**

October 2017 ★★★★★

Another excellent turntable from Pro-Ject. The Essential III is easy to set up and offers a detailed and musical performance.

Speed 33½ & 45rpm **Size (hwd)** 11 x 42 x 33cm

**Pro-Ject Primary E £150**

November 2018 ★★★★★

Pro-Ject has revised a budget deck to nail the £150 market – and has succeeded on every front.

Speed 33½ & 45rpm **Size (hwd)** 11 x 42 x 33cm

NEW ENTRY

**Sony PS-HX500 £280**

Best USB turntable, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

A turntable with the ability to rip vinyl into hi-res files, but it's also an entertaining deck with a big, open sound.

Speed 33½ & 45rpm **Size (hwd)** 11 x 43 x 36cm

AWARD WINNER

**Audio Technica AT-LP5 £330**

Awards 2016 ★★★★★

A pleasure to use and listen to, the LP5 boasts both ease of use and the added bonus of a USB output. At this price there's none better.

Speed 33½ & 45rpm **Size (hwd)** 16 x 45 x 35cm

**Pro-Ject Debut III S Audiophile £325**

June 2018 ★★★★★

Its solid design, smart finish and natural treble reinforce the Debut range's knack for delivering great, affordable sound.

Speed 33½ & 45rpm **Size (hwd)** 12 x 42 x 32cm



Pro-Ject Juke Box E £370

July 2018 ★★★★★

An impressive all-in-one system with a level of functionality that's difficult to replicate in individual separates for a similar price.

Speed 33½ & 45rpm **Size (hwd)** 12 x 42 x 33cm



Rega Planar 1 Plus £329

July 2018 ★★★★★

A winning combination of convenience and quality. Its fuss-free set-up and a hugely enjoyable sound make for a brilliant performer.

Speed 33½ & 45rpm **Size (hwd)** 12 x 45 x 36cm



Rega Planar 2 £375

August 2016 ★★★★★

Forty years old and still going strong, the Planar 2 is a big leap up from the RP1, but also offers great sound at a competitive price.

Speed 33½ & 45rpm **Size (hwd)** 12 x 45 x 36cm



Clearaudio Concept £995

Best turntable £800-£1200+, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

A thoroughly sorted, easy-to-own package with tremendous sound, combining punch, extension and tonal variation in equal measure.

Speed 33½, 45, 78rpm **Size (hwd)** 14 x 42 x 35cm



Rega Planar 3/Elys 2 £625

Best turntable £500-£800, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

Rega builds on the 3's predecessor by adding extra servings of clarity, precision and insight. The result is the best RP3 yet.

Speed 33½, 45rpm **Size (hwd)** 12 x 45 x 36cm



EAT B-Sharp Super Pack £1370

July 2018 ★★★★★

EAT's 'entry-level' deck is a fine one that can count among its talents a sense of control, sure composure and a well judged sonic balance.

Speed 33½, 45, 78rpm **Size (hwd)** 14 x 46 x 35cm



Rega Planar 6/Ania £1400

Best turntable £1200+, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

A refined, articulate and precise turntable that's lovely to listen to. It requires good system-matching to get the best out of it though.

Speed 33½, 45rpm **Size (hwd)** 12 x 45 x 37cm



Rega RP8/Apheta £2300

December 2014 ★★★★★

A terrific turntable that sets standards at the price. A detailed sound delivered with superb agility, strong dynamics and exceptional precision.

Speed 33½, 45rpm **Size (hwd)** 12 x 45 x 36cm



VPI Prime £3750

Awards 2015 ★★★★★

A confident-sounding package that can organise with the best and maintain composure even when faced with the most challenging music.

Speed 33½, 45rpm **Size (hwd)** 18 x 54 x 40cm



VPI Prime Signature £6000

February 2018 ★★★★★

An upgraded version of the standard Prime that builds on that model's strengths, with more insight, stronger dynamics and a lovely stability.

Speed 33½, 45rpm **Size (hwd)** 18 x 54 x 40cm



£300 to £600

£600 to £1000

£1000 to £2000

£2000 to £7000

£2000 to £7000

£7000 and above

Linn Klimax LP12 £18,670

July 2017 ★★★★★

A mightily expensive deck that has the unmistakable feel of real quality. It's startlingly better than previous LP12 turntables.

Speed 33½, 45, 78rpm **Size (hwd)** 14 x 45 x 36cm



WIRELESS SPEAKERS

FREE YOUR MUSIC WITH ONE OF THESE STREAMING WONDERS

View offers
whf.cm/BBWirelessSpeakers

Up to £100

Ultimate Ears Roll 2 £60

Best portable wireless speaker under £100, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

The Roll 2 has a sound that's more open, more dynamic and goes louder than its predecessor. The drop in price makes this a bargain.

Size (hw) 4 x 14cm **Battery** Yes, up to 9 hrs playback

AWARD WINNER



"It has the same sense of fun as the previous model, but there's a touch of maturity with the Roll 2"

Ultimate Ears Wonderboom £90

June 2017 ★★★★★

If you want a travelling companion you can rely on, this portable, rugged and durable speaker is a great-sounding option.

Size (hw) 10.2 x 9.4cm **Battery** Yes, up to 10 hours (at 75% volume)



"It might be about as big as a coffee mug, but it certainly won't break quite so easily"

£100 to £200

JBL Flip 3 £100

May 2016 ★★★★★

Correcting the missteps of the Flip 2, the Flip 3 boasts a smooth, warm sound as well as improved battery life and connectivity.

Size (hwd) 6 x 17 x 6cm **Battery** Yes, up to 10 hrs playback



"It's a chunky 450g – there's a reassuring amount of meat on those bones – but also positively handbag-sized"

Audio Pro Addon T3 £165

Best portable wireless speaker £100-£250, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

This classy boombox from Audio Pro ignores gimmicks and focuses on delivering the best sound possible for an extremely tempting price.

Size (hwd) 12 x 22 x 14cm **Battery** Yes, up to 30 hrs (at half volume)

AWARD WINNER



"It is comfortable and more communicative than your average budget wireless speaker"

Audio Pro Addon T5 £180

Best wireless speaker under £200, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

An impressive stationary wireless speaker that offers great dynamism, a clear and transparent sound and a good sense of timing.

Size (hwd) 13 x 25 x 15cm **Battery** No

AWARD WINNER



"You'll be hard pressed to get something much better without dipping a lot deeper into your piggy bank"

Tivoli Andiamo wireless speaker £190

November 2018 ★★★★★

A stylish product whose performance lives up to its looks, with a musical sound hard to better at the money

Size (hwd) 5.5 x 13.5 x 13.5cm **Battery** Yes



"It's a level of performance and articulation that's hard to find for this money"

£200 to £400

Cambridge Yoyo (S) £150

March 2017 ★★★★★

This portable wireless speaker is an accomplished Bluetooth performer. Its feature list is extensive – and the woolly jacket is rather lovely.

Size (hwd) 13 x 25 x 7cm **Battery** Yes



"The Yoyo's top end is as sweet as its lower end is melodious"

Monitor Audio Airstream S150 £150

Awards 2016 ★★★★★

The Airstream S150 boasts impressive clarity and detail with solid, weighty bass and an agile and dynamic delivery.

Size (hwd) 27 x 12 x 14cm **Battery** No



"At high volumes, the S150 remains composed and well behaved throughout the frequencies"

Audio Pro Addon C5 £230

Best wireless speaker £200-£500, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

Audio Pro has added proper multi-room functionality and made a fine fist of it. There aren't many wireless speakers as good as this one.

Size (hwd) 13 x 25 x 15cm **Battery** No**PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR**

"There aren't many wireless speakers we'd want throughout the house as much as this one"

£200 to £400

Dali Katch £330

Best portable wireless speaker £250+, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

The Katch has significantly raised the bar among portable wireless speakers.

Its powerful, versatile sound is just one of many highlights.

Size (hwd) 14 x 27 x 5cm **Battery** Yes, up to 24 hrs playback**AWARD
WINNER**

"The size of the sound is quite simply incredible for something of the Katch's stature"

B&W Zeppelin Wireless £500

December 2015 ★★★★★

Eight years on, the Zeppelin speaker is still a must-have for the audiophile who wants fine sound in a convenient package.

Size (hwd) 18 x 66 x 18cm **Battery** No

"There's no shortage of clarity and insight at this price"

£400 to £600

Sonos Play:5 £500

December 2015 ★★★★★

Rich bass response, great detail and crystal-clear midrange make the Play:5 a class leader as a wireless speaker or part of a multi-room set-up.

Size (hwd) 20 x 36 x 15cm **Battery** No

"There's no doubt it creates a wonderfully rich sound"

B&O BeoPlay A6 £800

February 2016 ★★★★★

Oozing style and substance, the A6 effortlessly combines the simplicity and convenience of a one-box system. It's a job fully well done.

Size (hwd) 30 x 54 x 16cm **Battery** No

"The A6 will stream pretty much anything from almost anywhere and in any way you like"

£600 and above

Audio Pro Drumfire £650

September 2018 ★★★★★

Audio Pro's biggest and loudest speaker features a performance that combines tight bass, a clear midrange and a good sense of space.

Size (hwd) 65 x 52 x 19cm **Battery** No

"As an all-in-one system to which to connect a multitude of sources, the Drumfire is a great choice for the money"

Bluesound Pulse 2 £650

July 2016 ★★★★★

A speaker with a big and bold character, it has a rich and engaging sound that fills the biggest of rooms. A big step in the right direction.

Size (hwd) 20 x 42 x 19cm **Battery** No

"You're going to need a pretty big room to get the most from the scale on offer here"

£600 and above

Naim Mu-So £995

Best wireless speaker £500+, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

The Mu-so has a rich, powerful sound, a huge sense of scale and soaring dynamics – and has now been updated to accommodate Tidal.

Size (hwd) 12 x 63 x 26cm **Battery** No**AWARD
WINNER**

"The Mu-so charges through songs with boundless energy and enthusiasm"

Apple HomePod £330

April 2018 ★★★★★

It works best if you're in the Apple ecosystem, but nevertheless it's the best-sounding, most music-orientated smart speaker available.

Size (hd) 17 x 14cm **Battery** No

"It's also capable of going loud, and remains composed, clear and unflustered even at maximum volume"

Smart speakers

Sonos One £200

Awards 2017 ★★★★★

Essentially a Play:1 with Alexa. The odd software niggles at launch but, basically, one of the best wireless speakers around just got smarter.

Size (hwd) 16 x 12 x 12cm **Battery** No

"The soundstage is spacious and impressively organised, with vocals given plenty of breathing room"

BUYER'S GUIDE

BEST BUYS

The only products worth considering

HOME CINEMA

BLU-RAY PLAYERS

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Up to £100

Panasonic DMP-BDT180EB £80

Best Blu-ray player under £100, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

A budget player that delivers a high-quality picture. Whether it's Blu-ray, DVD or streaming this spinner handles them all with skill and flair.

Compatibility Blu-ray, DVD, CDAWARD
WINNER**Sony BDP-S3700 £85**

May 2017 ★★★★★

A combination of impressive picture, smart functions and decent sound makes this a welcome, low-cost addition for any home cinema set-up.

Compatibility Blu-ray, DVD, CD

£100 to £500

Sony UBP-X700 £250

June 2018 ★★★★★

This 4K player delivers a stunningly natural picture for an affordable price. It'll be tough to knock this Sony off its perch.

Compatibility 4K Blu-ray, Blu-ray, DVD, CD**Sony UBP-X800 £300**

Best 4K Blu-ray player under £500, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

Sony's first 4K player astonishes with its colourful images and excellent sound quality, setting an impressively high standard for 4K Blu-ray.

Compatibility 4K Blu-ray, Blu-ray, DVD, CDPRODUCT
OF THE YEAR

£500 and above

Cambridge CXUHD £700

February 2018 ★★★★★

One of the best 4K players available, this delivers an accurate and understated performance that's one of the best we've seen and heard.

Compatibility 4K Blu-ray, Blu-ray, DVD, CD**Sony UBP-X1000ES £725**

Reviewed online ★★★★★

A superb premium 4K player with an impressive picture, great sound and a decent array of streaming services. No Dolby Vision, though.

Compatibility 4K Blu-ray, Blu-ray, DVD, CD

HOME CINEMA AMPLIFIERS

STUNNING SOUND THAT TRULY BRINGS MOVIES TO LIFE

View offers
whf.cm/BBHomeCinemaAmpsUp to
£500**Denon AVR-X2500H £499**

October 2018 ★★★★★

Builds upon its predecessor's all-round excellence, with plenty of extra muscle. This will be a strong draw for anyone with £500 to spend.

Power 7 x 95W **Dolby Atmos** Yes **HDMI in/out** 8/2

Sony STR-DN1080 £525

Best home cinema amplifier under £1000, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

Sony's latest AV amp is a return to form, with cutting-edge features (inc. Dolby Atmos) and a compelling sound. It ticks all the right boxes.

Power 7 x 100W Dolby Atmos Yes HDMI in/out 6/2

PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR



£500 to £1000

Denon AVR-X4400H £829

August 2018 ★★★★★

A stonking amp that continues Denon's excellent run of form with a solid feature set and a sound that combines muscle and musicality.

Power 105W Dolby Atmos Yes HDMI in/out 8/3



Denon AVR-X6400H £2300

Best home cinema amplifier over £1000, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

A terrifically composed, articulate and confident AV receiver that delivers a captivating home cinema performance for the price.

Power 205W Dolby Atmos Yes HDMI in/out 8/3

AWARD
WINNER



£1000 and
above

PROJECTORS

BECAUSE A MASSIVE PICTURE IS HOME CINEMA

View offers
whf.cm/BBProjectors

Epson EH-TW5350 £500

Best projector under £1000, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

A talented budget effort that handles motion, contrast and colour balance with great skill. It's a mature and enjoyable projector.

Throw ratio 1.22-1.47:1 Inputs HDMI x 2, RCA, composite Spks Yes

AWARD
WINNER



Up to
£1000

Optoma UHD40 £1300

June 2018 ★★★★★

A '4K' projector that brings top-tier technology to a budget price point, this device boasts punchy colours and insightful detail.

Throw ratio 1.21:1-1.59:1 Inputs HDMI x 2, VGA, 3.5mm Speakers Yes



£1000 to £3000

Sony VPL-HW45ES £2000

Best projector £1000-£2000, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

Delivers a riveting picture that strikes the perfect balance between performance and price. Great for a first projector or an upgrade.

Throw ratio n/a Inputs 2 x HDMI, USB Speakers No

AWARD
WINNER



£3000 to £10,000

Optoma UHD65 £3000

Best projector £2000-£4000, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

It may not have the bells and whistles of a high-end 4K projector, but it puts in a sophisticated performance, is future-proof and well priced.

Throw ratio 1.39-2.22:1 Inputs HDMI 2, PC 2, Phono Speakers No

PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR



Sony VPL-VW260ES £5200

June 2018 ★★★★★

This projector brings Sony's 4K expertise to a more affordable price point with an excellent performance that's both sharp and colourful.

Throw ratio n/a Inputs HDMI x 2, Ethernet, USB Speakers No



£10,000
and above

JVC DLA-Z1 £35,000

August 2017 ★★★★★

Produces the finest image we've seen in our test rooms. It showcases 4K in all its glory – but that performance comes with a huge price tag.

Throw ratio 1.29-2.61 Inputs 2 x HDMI Speakers No



SET-TOP BOXES

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whf.cm/BBSetTopBoxes](http://whf.cm/BBSetTopBoxes)

PVRs

Humax FVP-5000T £230

Best PVR, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

If you need a Full HD box to give your older TV some more sparkle, Humax's digital box should absolutely be something to consider.

Tuners 3 Storage 500GB Ultra HD NoAWARD
WINNER

Set-top

BT Ultra HD YouView min £15/month + fees

November 2015 ★★★★★☆

The first 4K box to hit the market, this is the most accomplished live TV you can watch. Content is limited right now – so it's one for sports fans.

Tuners 2 Storage 1TB Ultra HD Yes**Sky Q 2TB from £44/month + fees**

Best subscription box, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

Sky has overhauled its TV package with Q and made it more enticing, versatile and contemporary, but it does come with a high price tag.

Tuners 4 Storage 2TB Ultra HD YesPRODUCT
OF THE YEAR

SOUNDBARS

AN IMPRESSIVE WAY TO IMPROVE YOUR TV'S SOUND

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Up to £500

Q Acoustics Media 4 £330

Awards 2016 ★★★★★

Q Acoustics' debut soundbar is remarkable value – even more so at its reduced price – and more than worthy of its two-time PoY status.

Size (hwd) 9 x 100 x 14cm Inputs Optical, RCA Subwoofer No**Yamaha YAS-207 £350**

Best soundbar under £500, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

The latest in a series of fine Yamaha soundbars, this is a compelling, class-leading performer in a practical, easy-to-use package.

Size (hwd) 6 x 93 x 11cm Inputs Opt, HDMI, 3.5mm, B'tooth Sub YesAWARD
WINNER**Sonos Beam £399**

September 2018 ★★★★★

A compact soundbar that pumps out a rather exceptional sound for its size and price. It could potentially transform your listening experience.

Size (hwd) 7 x 65 x 10cm Inputs Optical, HDMI ARC, AirPlay Sub No

£500 to £1000

Dali Kubik One £800

Best soundbar £500-£1000, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

A gorgeous and complete package, Dali's debut soundbar impresses with its hugely engaging sound and smart, well-equipped exterior.

Size (hwd) 15 x 98 x 10cm Inputs Optical, RCA x2 Subwoofer NoAWARD
WINNER**Sonos Playbar £700**

August 2017 ★★★★★

It's not perfect but, given the choice of this and the Playbase (see opposite), we'd go for this better-sounding Playbar.

Size 9 x 90 x 14cm Inputs optical, ethernet Sub Yes

Yamaha YSP-2700 £800

February 2017 ★★★★★

With a spacious, involving sound the YSP-2700 is the most convincing surround experience you'll get outside of a full 5.1 surround system.

Size (hwd) 5 x 94 x 15cm **Inputs** HDMI x3, opt, coax **Subwoofer** Yes

£500 to
£1000**Sony HT-ST5000 £1500**

Best soundbar £1000+, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

Delivers an accomplished Atmos performance that we'd have no hesitation in recommending. It is a superb-sounding effort.

Size (hwd) 118 x 8 x 15cm **Inputs** HDMI x3, opt, USB, a'log **Sub** Yes

£1000
and above

SOUNDBASES

AN ALTERNATIVE SOURCE OF SUPERIOR TV SOUND

[View offers
whf.cm/BBSoundbases](http://whf.cm/BBSoundbases)
Canton DM55 £330

Awards 2016 ★★★★★

Replacing the DM50, the cheaper DM55 is even more appealing – its meaty yet subtle sound is a huge audio upgrade for your TV.

Size (hwd) 7 x 55 x 30cm **Inputs** Optical, coaxial



Up to £500

Q Acoustics M2 £300

Best soundbase, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

Q Acoustics can now 'soundbase' to its list of successes; the M2 is an expressive, easy-to-use and fuss-free way of boosting your TV sound.

Size (hwd) 9 x 55 x 34cm **Inputs** Opt, HDMI, 3.5mm, RCA, B'tooth



SPEAKER PACKAGES

GOOD SURROUND-SOUND IS A MOVIE-MAGIC MUST

[View offers
whf.cm/BBSpeakerPackages](http://whf.cm/BBSpeakerPackages)
B&W MT-50 £1100

Awards 2015 ★★★★★

These speakers sound crisp, clear and insightful, and the sub and satellites integrate so well. Value and versatility combined.

Size (hwd) Centre speaker 25 x 11 x 16cm **Finishes** 2



"It has all the detail, attack and deftness to deliver exhilaration in spades"

B&W MT-60D £1950

May 2012 ★★★★★

Compact and stylish (we love that sub), this package presents a dynamic, powerful sound that excels with surround sound and stereo music.

Size (hwd) Centre speaker 25 x 11 x 16cm **Finishes** 2



"It's adept at everything you'd want a 5.1-channel surround speaker package to do"

Dali Zensor 1 5.1 £980

Best speaker package under £1000, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

Why did it win an Award? For its punchy dynamics, abundance of detail, expression, articulation and impressive integration.

Size (hwd) Centre speaker 16 x 44 x 29cm **Finishes** 3



"It's a fluid, dynamic performance that soars with excitement before easily dropping right down for a bit of hush-hush"

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packages

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KEF LS50
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BEST STANDMOUNT SPEAKER UNDER £200

Dali Spektor 2
Bookshelf Speakers

WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2018

- Wood Fibre Cones
- Available in Black Ash & Walnut

Our Price:
£199.00



BEST STANDMOUNT SPEAKER UNDER £200 - £350

Monitor Audio Bronze 2
Bookshelf Speakers

WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2018

- Other colour variants available
- 100 watts power (8 ohm)

Our Price:
£279.00



BEST SPEAKER PACKAGE £500 - £1000

Q Acoustics 3010i
5.1 Speaker Package

WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2018

- Includes 2 pairs of Q3010i, Q3090CI and Q3060S subwoofer
- Available in Black, White & Walnut

Our Price:
£895.00



BEST WIRELESS SPEAKER OVER £500

Audio Pro Drumfire
Wireless Speaker

WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2018

- Bluetooth
- Apple AirPlay
- Multiroom speaker

Our Price:
£699.00



BEST FLOORSTANDING SPEAKER UNDER £500 - £1000

Dali Oberon 5
Floorstanding Speakers

WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2018

- Available in four finishes

Our Price:
£699.00



BEST DESKTOP SPEAKER £500 - £1000

Ruark MR1 MK2
Active Speakers

WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2018

- AptX Bluetooth for CD quality audio

Our Price:
£329.00



BEST WIRELESS SPEAKER £100 - £250

Audio Pro Addon C3
Wireless Speaker

WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2018

- WiFi connection
- Apple Airplay & Bluetooth connectivity

Our Price:
£249.00



BEST WIRELESS SPEAKER £250 - £500

Audio Pro Addon C10
Wireless Speaker

WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2018

- Apple AirPlay
- Spotify Connect

Our Price:
£269.00



BEST STANDMOUNT SPEAKER UNDER £350 - £500

MISSION QX-2
Bookshelf Speakers

WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2018

- New Ring Dome Technology
- Available in 4 finishes

Our Price:
£399.00



BEST SOUNDBAR UNDER £300

Yamaha YAS207
Soundbar

WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2018

- Bluetooth* wireless music streaming
- Slim, understated design perfectly complements your TV

Our Price:
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BEST ANALOGUE INTERCONNECT OVER £50

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Marantz PM6006UK SE Integrated Amplifier

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BEST CD PLAYER UNDER £500

Marantz CD6006UK SE Compact Disc Player

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AWARDS 2018

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BEST PRICE

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- ▶ USB Audio and D-Bus inputs



BEST PROJECTOR OVER £1500

Optoma UHD65 4K Projector

WHAT HI-FI?
AWARDS 2018

- ▶ Over 8 million Pixels for high detailed images
- ▶ USB Connectivity



Our Price:
£2999.00

BEST MICRO SYSTEM

Denon DM41DAB Micro System

WHAT HI-FI?
AWARDS 2018

SAVE ££'S ON
PACKAGE DEALS

- ▶ Bluetooth
- ▶ Available in Black or Silver

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BEST PRICE



BEST TURNTABLE UNDER £200

Project Primary E Turntable

WHAT HI-FI?
AWARDS 2018

- ▶ 33 and 45RPM
- ▶ Perimeter belt drive turntable
- ▶ Gold-plated RCA interconnect cable



Our Price:
£149.00

BEST SOUNDBASE

Q Acoustics M2 Soundbase

WHAT HI-FI?
AWARDS 2018

- ▶ Delivers stunning TV and audio sound performance
- ▶ Music via Bluetooth APTX or NFC for Android devices

Our Price:
£299.00



BEST PROJECTOR UNDER £1500

Optoma UHD40 4K Projector

WHAT HI-FI?
AWARDS 2018

- ▶ HDCP2.2 Support
- ▶ In-built stereo speaker



Our Price:
£1199.00

BEST HOME CINEMA AMPLIFIER OVER £1500

Denon AVCX6500H 4K Amplifier

WHAT HI-FI?
AWARDS 2018

CALL FOR THE
BEST PRICE

- ▶ Dolby Atmos & DTS:X
- ▶ HDCP 2.2 Support
- ▶ Amazon Alexa voice compatibility



BEST HOME CINEMA AMPLIFIER £500 - £1500

Denon AVR3500H 4K Amplifier

WHAT HI-FI?
AWARDS 2018

CALL FOR THE
BEST PRICE

- ▶ 7.2 channels
- ▶ Built-in Heos & Amazon Alexa compatible
- ▶ Dolby Atmos & DTS-X



BEST RADIO OVER £100

Roberts Stream 94i Smart Radio with Bluetooth

WHAT HI-FI?
AWARDS 2018

- ▶ Bluetooth connectivity
- ▶ Music player via USB

Our Price:
£199.95



BEST TV UNDER £2500

Sony KD-65XF9005 "65" 4K LCD Television

CALL FOR THE
BEST PRICE

WHAT HI-FI?
AWARDS 2018



- ▶ Dolby Vision & HDR10
- ▶ X-Motion picture clarity

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Traditional packages up to £2000

Q Acoustics 3000 Series 5.1 £700

July 2015 ★★★★★

A budget package that makes a film's soundtrack come across as subtle, atmospheric and detailed. This is a fun listening experience.

Size (hwd) Centre speaker 15 x 43 x 20cm **Finishes** 5



"Continues the Q Acoustics' tradition of punching way above its weight"

Q Acoustics 3050i 5.1 Cinema Pack £1349

December 2018 ★★★★★

If you're looking for a floorstanding speaker package to elevate your home cinema for less than two grand, you should consider this set of Q Acoustics.

Size (hwd) Centre speaker 16 x 43 x 22 cm **Finishes** 4



"It's worth stressing just how talented the 3050i 5.1 Cinema Pack is. It's an instant hit"

Monitor Audio Bronze B5 AV £1490

Best speaker package £1000-£2000, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

Our Speaker Package Product of the Year is beautifully designed, has ample punch, creates a spacious soundfield and is very musical.

Size (hwd) Centre speaker 17 x 46 x 19cm **Finishes** 4

AWARD WINNER



"This may be the easiest £1500 you'll ever spend"

£2000 to £3000

KEF Q350 5.1 £2210

January 2018 ★★★★★

It takes up a fair bit of space, but the Q350 package puts in a powerful and precise performance. You'll struggle to do better for the money.

Size (hwd) Centre speaker 21 x 63 x 30cm **Finishes** 2



"If you have the space, then you should consider opening your home to this outstanding KEF package"

Monitor Audio Silver 200 AV12 £2875

Best speaker package £2000+, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

A little patience may be required, but once it hits its stride the Silver 200 AV12 is an expressive, fun and talented speaker package.

Size (hwd) Centre speaker 16 x 45 x 20cm **Finishes** 6

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR



"Rarely are we so fully behind a speaker package for its work both in stereo and in surround sound"

£3000 and above

ATC C1 5.1 £3250

Awards 2016 ★★★★★

We'd like a bit more authority in the bass, but we're delighted by the detailed, agile sound, focused surround steering and power on offer.

Size (hwd) Centre speaker 16 x 41 x 28cm **Finishes** 2



"For small to medium-sized rooms, we can think of no better alternative"

PMC Twenty 23 5.1 £8240

July 2016 ★★★★★

One of our favourite floorstanders features in a speaker package that delivers a captivating performance. So good it's our reference system.

Size (hwd) Centre speaker 17 x 52 x 31cm **Finishes** 1



"Stick with the PMCs and you'll be rewarded with an incredible surround-sound experience"

VIDEO STREAMERS

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Up to £50

Amazon Fire TV stick w/Alexa £40

June 2017 ★★★★★

The core design remains similar while the low price and addition of Alexa make the Fire TV stick a cheap way of getting smart apps on your TV.

Resolution 1080p, 720p **Storage** 8GB **Ultra HD** No

**Google Chromecast 2 £30**

December 2015 ★★★★★

The second-gen Chromecast still 'casts' content from a device to a TV over wi-fi, but now with speedier operation and a performance boost.

Resolution 1080p, 720p **Storage** No **Ultra HD** No



Now TV (2015) £15

February 2016 ★★★★★

Now it outputs 1080p and passes through 7.1 surround sound, Now TV is a great way to open your doors to a plethora of Sky content.

Resolution 1080p, 720p **Storage** n/a **Ultra HD** No



Up to £50

Amazon Fire TV (2015) £80

Awards 2016 ★★★★★

An improvement on the first Fire TV. For the same money you get 4K streaming, greater speed and power, and expanded storage options.

Resolution 2160p, 1080p, 720p **Storage** 8GB **Ultra HD** Yes



£50 to £150

Sony PS4 Pro £350

February 2017 ★★★★★☆

The Pro offers a solid, relatively affordable upgrade over the base PS4, but still needs work to be an all-in-one 4K streamer and player.

Resolution 2160p, 1080p, 1080i, 720p **Storage** 1TB **Ultra HD** Yes



£150 and above

Microsoft Xbox One X £450

January 2018 ★★★★★☆

A capable, all-consuming box of 4K tricks. The interface has never been better and the jump in picture quality and audio abilities is welcome.

Resolution 2160p, 1080p, 1080i, 720p **Storage** 1TB **Ultra HD** Yes



TELEVISIONS

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[View offers whf.cm/BBTelevisions](http://whf.cm/BBTelevisions)
Samsung UE32M5500 £320

Best 32-39in TV, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

It's not the most sophisticated TV, lacking 4K and HDR, but for a 32in screen it offers a picture and features that will leave you satisfied.

Type LCD/LED **HDMI** 3 **Resolution** 1366 x 768 **Tuner** Freeview HD

AWARD WINNER



"Motion is impressive, arguably more so than on many larger 2017 Samsungs we've seen"

Up to 40in

Samsung UE40MU6400 £500

Best 40-46in TV, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

A 4K TV at a sensible size and a reasonable price that boasts deep, insightful blacks and nuanced colours. Not the best at HDR, though.

Type LCD/LED **HDMI** 3 **Resolution** Ultra HD **Tuner** Freeview/Freesat HD

AWARD WINNER



"Every source is delivered with an impressive amount of insight into those deep blacks"

40in to 50in

Sony KD-49XF9005 £1300

September 2018 ★★★★★

A small step forward from the 49XE9005. The improvements can be felt mainly in the colour and contrast performance. It's the 49in TV to beat.

Type LCD/LED **HDMI** 4 **Resolution** Ultra HD **Tuner** Freeview HD/YouView



"Only slight improvements on its predecessor, but they nevertheless make this a better of a TV"

50in to 60in

Samsung QE55Q9FN £3000

July 2018 ★★★★★

A worthy rival to the OLEDs of this world, this Samsung QLED boasts a bright and vibrant picture with a deep, uniform black performance.

Type QLED **HDMI** 2 **Resolution** Ultra HD **Tuner** TVPlus/Freesat HD



"Undeniably a huge step forward for Samsung's QLED"

LG OLED55C8PLA £3000

June 2018 ★★★★★

Not a giant leap forward for LG's OLEDs, but the C8 has improved things in small yet significant ways. It's a great all-rounder.

Type OLED **HDMI** 4 **Resolution** Ultra HD **Tuner** Freeview/Freesat HD



"It's an exceptional performer, one that gives the Sony KD-55A1 a run for its money"

Philips 50PUS6703 £499

August 2018 ★★★★★

While it has a few usability flaws, this budget-priced 4K TV from Philips offers a punchy, insightful and nuanced picture for a relatively low price.

Type LCD/LED **HDMI** 3 **Resolution** Ultra HD **Tuner** Freeview Play

NEW PRICE!

"Whatever you're watching, the 50PUS6703 will do it proud"

Philips 55POS9002 £2000

February 2018 ★★★★★

A real return to form for Philips with one of the finest TVs around. It puts in a stunning HDR image and is aided by terrific Ambilight performance.

Type LCD/LED **HDMI** 4 **Resolution** Ultra HD **Tuner** Freeview HD



"It's been a long time since the brand properly floored us with a TV, but this OLED has done just that"

Sony KD-65A1 £4500

Best 65in TV £2500+, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

Probably the finest TV money can buy, with more punch and vibrancy than an OLED LG and a completely unique and innovative design.

Type OLED **HDMI** 4 **Resolution** Ultra HD **Tuner** Freeview HD

AWARD WINNER

"The A1 is a fabulous, unique piece of design that Sony should be immensely proud of"

Sony KD-65XF9005 £2300

June 2018 ★★★★★

A mid-range TV that punches above its weight, delivering fantastic detail and an image that's brilliantly bright and punchy.

Type LCD/LED **HDMI** 4 **Resolution** Ultra HD **Tuner** YouView/F'view HD



"Delivers a picture performance not significantly short of the very best flagship models of 2017"

Sony KD-65AF9 £3999

December 2018 ★★★★★

The Sony AF9 is a stunner in so many ways, not to mention one of the best-sounding tellies we've tested.

Type OLED **HDMI** 4 **Resolution** Ultra HD **Tuner** YouView/F'view HD



"Exceptional motion processing, superb detail, awesome 1080p delivery, and excellent sound"

TV Tech Explained

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Recent advances in TV technology have spawned a host of new acronyms and confusing formats. What does it all mean?

What is 4K Ultra HD?

Officially, 4K resolution is 4096 x 2160 pixels. However, in order to shoehorn this into a 16:9 format, it was altered to 3840 x 2160 – four times the number of pixels on a Full HD screen (1920 x 1080).

There are lots of 4K TVs on the market, a few 4K projectors and even 4K phones. Amazon, Netflix and YouTube all offer streaming 4K content, including on boxes such as the Amazon Fire TV 4K and Google Chromecast Ultra.

What is HDR?

High Dynamic Range refers to a technique to heighten the contrast between the brightest whites and the darkest blacks. The higher the dynamic range, the closer an image gets to real life. As TVs have become more capable, they can go a lot brighter – but the tech isn't about brightness, it's about widening the range to display finer increments of shading and get more detail in shadows and highlights.

There are four main varieties of HDR: HDR10, HDR10+, HLG and Dolby Vision.

HDR10

HDR10 is the original and most common form of HDR. All current 4K TVs feature HDR10 and so should be compatible with the most widely available 4K Blu-ray discs, 4K players and 4K streaming content.

Samsung, meanwhile has developed its own standard, **HDR10+**, using dynamic metadata to boost HDR images frame-by-frame, but no 2018 Samsung TV supports Dolby Vision.

Dolby Vision

Dolby Vision differs from HDR10 in that, while the latter applies its parameters scene by scene, Dolby Vision allows for dynamic metadata to be added on a frame by frame basis, giving an improved image.

HDR10 and Dolby Vision can feature on the same TVs and discs. You will need a Dolby Vision-compatible disc, Blu-ray player and TV to enjoy the tech at home.

HLG

The result of a research project between the BBC and Japanese broadcaster NHK, Hybrid

Log Gamma (HLG) is potentially the most important HDR format.

It takes standard dynamic range and HDR images and combines them into one feed, with HLG-compatible 4K TVs able to decode and show HDR images.

What is OLED?

Organic Light-Emitting Diode (OLED) works with a carbon-based film between two conductors, which emits light when an electrical current is passed through it.

With LCD, you can't achieve true blacks as the backlight affects neighbouring pixels. As OLED pixels generate their own light, they become pitch-black when turned off.

What is QLED?

Quantum-dot Light Emitting Diode (QLED) is a refinement of LCD technology where a Quantum-dot layer is placed between the backlight and the LCD panel. With further development, we could soon reach a point where the Quantum dot particles can generate their own light – and then OLED will really have something to worry about.



BUYER'S GUIDE

BEST BUYS

The only products worth considering

PORTABLE HEADPHONES

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Beyerdynamic Byron £49

Best in-ears under £50, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

A spectacular return to the budget earphone arena for Beyerdynamic, the Byron sets the standard at this price with a peerless performance.

In-line controls Yes Cable length 1.2m

AWARD WINNER



In-ears up to £50

SoundMagic E10C £40

Awards 2016 ★★★★★

The C stands for compatibility but could stand for consistency too.

Five years in and these in-ears are still as good as they've ever been.

In-line controls Yes Cable length 1.2m



Sennheiser Momentum M2 IEi £80

Best in-ears £50-£100, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

You wouldn't think anything so small could sound quite so good – not for just £80. But they are wonderfully smooth, expressive and balanced.

In-line controls Yes Cable length 1.3m

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR



£50 to £100

Bose SoundSport Pulse £170

February 2017 ★★★★★

The best-sounding pair of wireless in-ears we've heard so far. The low battery life is a downside but the sound is fun and enjoyable.

In-line controls Yes Cable length n/a



£100 to £200

Sennheiser Momentum M2 IE Free £170

March 2018 ★★★★★

With excellent dynamics and a powerful, musical performance, the IE Free combines wireless convenience with excellent sound quality.

In-line controls Yes Cable length n/a



Shure SE425 £240

Best in-ears £100-£300, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

If you're serious about the quality of your in-ear headphones, we'd point you here. The energetic, immersive performance is irresistible.

In-line controls Yes Cable length 1.6m

AWARD WINNER



Sony WI-1000X £300

February 2018 ★★★★★

The best of both worlds thanks to great sound and fine noise-cancelling capabilities. Absolutely worth your time and money.

In-line controls Yes Cable length 1m



£200 to £500

AKG N40 £350

Best in-ears £300+, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

They sound great, however, you'll need a decent portable DAC and hi-res tracks to make the most of it, so they're not for the casual user.

In-line controls No Cable length 1.2m

AWARD WINNER



£200 to
£500**Sony WF-1000X £200****Best wireless in-ears, Awards 2017 ★★★★★**

In terms of 'proper' wireless in-ears, this Sony is the best product we've had the pleasure of testing so far. It's genuinely fantastic.

Controls Yes **Cable length** n/a

**AWARD
WINNER**£500 and
above**Shure KSE1500 £2500****November 2016 ★★★★★**

At this price they won't be for everyone, but they are the finest in-ears we've heard and arguably one of the best headphones money can buy.

In-line controls Yes **Cable length** 1.3m



On-ears up to £100

Koss Porta Pro £25**August 2018 ★★★★★**

Headphones that stretch all the way back to 1984, these deliver decent punch and detail and, most of all, they're a lot of fun to listen to.

Type Open **Connection** 3.5/6.3mm **Weight** 60g

**NEW
ENTRY****AKG K92 £50****Awards 2016 ★★★★★**

They look a little blingy, but a smooth, detailed sound and excellent build quality make the K92s one of 2016's best-value headphones.

Type Closed **Connection** 3.5/6.3mm **Weight** 200g

**AKG Y50 £80****Best portable on-ears under £150, Awards 2017 ★★★★★**

Our Product of the Year cans for 2015 are portable on-ears, and deliver a rhythmic, clear, detailed, dynamic sound. At this price they're amazing.

Type Closed **Connection** 3.5mm **Weight** 190g

**PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR**

£100 to £200

AKG K550 £150**Best home on-ears £100-£200, Awards 2017 ★★★★★**

These on-ears, relatively light and very comfy, are communicative too. Natural and unforced, they deliver bass with punch and precision.

Type Closed **Connection** 3.5mm/6.3mm **Weight** 305g

**AWARD
WINNER****Grado SR125e £150****December 2014 ★★★★★**

These might look suited to the ears of a wartime radio operator, but they sound great. Best used in the home though, as they're very leaky.

Type Open **Connection** 3.5mm/6.5mm **Weight** 363g

**Sony UBP-X1000ES £725****Reviewed online ★★★★★**

A superb premium 4K player with an impressive picture, great sound and a decent array of streaming services. No Dolby Vision, though.

Compatibility 4K Blu-ray, Blu-ray, DVD, CD

**AWARD
WINNER**

£200 to £300

Grado SR80e £100**Best home on-ears under £100, Awards 2017 ★★★★★**

These Grados aren't the most relaxing listen, but the excellent treble and midrange make for an exceptional performer.

Type Open **Connection** 3.5/6.3mm **Weight** 210g

**Grado SR325e £280****Best home on-ears £200-£400, Awards 2017 ★★★★★**

If you don't mind the amount of sound leaking from them, you're free to enjoy the fluid dynamics and wonderfully musical presentation.

Type Open **Connection** 3.5mm/6.5mm **Weight** 330g

**AWARD
WINNER**

Philips Fidelio M2L £200

December 2016 ★★★★★

These Lightning-connected cans boast an exciting and refined sound. In fact, they're the best Lightning-based headphones we've heard so far.

Type Closed **Connection** Lightning **Weight** 200g

**Philips Fidelio X2 £230**

October 2015 ★★★★★

The X2s have a smooth, neutral sound, great rhythm and punchy bass. Superior design helps make them supremely comfortable too.

Type Open **Connection** 3.5mm **Weight** 380g

**Sennheiser Momentum 2.0 £200**

Best portable on-ears £150+, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

We love the design, but it's more than just pretty – these Momentums are comfortable on your ears and fold away neatly when not in use.

Type Closed **Connection** 3.5mm **Weight** 240g

**Audio Technica ATH-W1000Z £600**

March 2017 ★★★★★

The 11th version of the W1000z opts for evolution over revolution and with a spacious sound that packs power and punch, it's a good choice.

Type Closed **Connection** 6.3mm **Weight** 320g

**Beyerdynamic Amiron £550**

Best home on-ears £400+, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

Beyerdynamic has produced a pair of headphones that sound as good as they feel. Be careful though; their open-backed nature leaks sound.

Type Open **Connection** 3.5mm/6.3mm **Weight** 340g



£200 to £300

£300 to £700

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£700 to £1000

Beyerdynamic T1 2nd Generation £850

Awards 2016 ★★★★★

Six years on and a few refinements later, the T1s are just as stunning. These 'phones are insightful, comfortable to wear and a joy to listen to.

Type Semi-open **Connection** 3.5mm/6.3mm **Weight** 360g

**B&W P9 Signature £700**

December 2016 ★★★★★

They're not cheap but there's no doubt these are talented cans. A retro look, stunning sound and a comfy fit make these worth their price.

Type Closed **Connection** 6.3mm/Lightning in 2017 **Weight** 413g



£1000 and above

Focal Utopia £3250

June 2017 ★★★★★

With these cans Focal has aimed for the moon and reached it, delivering one of the finest pairs of headphones we've heard.

Type Open **Connection** 6.3mm **Weight** 490g

**Sennheiser HD800S £1200**

June 2016 ★★★★★

If the price invites doubts, rest assured the performance is absolutely worth it, provided your source and amplification are up to the job.

Type Open **Connection** 6.3mm **Weight** 330g

**Sony MDR-Z1R £1700**

April 2017 ★★★★★

The finest closed-back headphones we have heard. Feed them with quality electronics and there is no doubt the Z1Rs will shine.

Type Closed **Connection** 3.5mm/6.3mm **Weight** 385g



Wireless up to £200

AKG Y50BT £130

Awards 2016 ★★★★★

By wireless standards, they're excellent. Clarity and insight are particular strong points, but it's also a great design.

Folding Yes **Quoted battery life** 20hrs+ **Wireless range** n/a

**Philips SHB8850NC £90**

Best wireless headphones under £200, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

A fantastic pair of noise-cancelling headphones that offer great sound and features, without making a huge dent in your wallet.

Folding Yes **Quoted battery life** 16 hours **Wireless range** n/a

**Headphone jargon busted**

Read more at...
www.whathifi.com/advice



What's the difference between the various on-ear headphones? Our jargon buster explains the various types, and why you might want to choose them over a different model

1. First, the most popular headphone design: the **over-the ear** model, also called circumaural. These cup your ears completely, usually with semi-air-tight earcups that help minimise both sound leakage from your headphones into the outside world, and the intrusive effects of ambient noise.

2. Supra-aural or **on-ear** designs tend to be smaller and lighter than circumaural models, and as the name suggests, they sit on your ear rather than over it. Some listeners find them lighter and easier to wear for extended listening, but they do tend to allow in more sound from outside.

3. Available in both circumaural and supra-aural types, **closed-back** headphones are the optimum choice for cutting out external sounds altogether. They'll also deliver more bass weight than other headphone types, because the closed ear cups prevent bass leakage.



4. **Open-back** headphones are vented designs that allow sound out through apertures in each earcup, reducing internal sound reflections and helping to create a more natural listening experience. More sound will leak out into the surrounding environment, and you'll also suffer more ambient noise intrusion.

5. **Semi-open** headphones, as the name implies, combine the characteristics of both closed and open-back designs: when done well, they can be a 'best of both worlds' solution, but equally, they can often fall between two stools.

AKG N60 NC Wireless £250

Best wireless headphones £200-£300, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

They've lost the cable, but the N60s retain the superb character of their wired equivalents. These are a great pair of portable noise-cancellers.

Folding Yes **Quoted battery life** 15hrs **Wireless range** n/aAWARD
WINNER**B&W P5 Wireless £230**

Awards 2016 ★★★★★

All the characteristics of the P5 Series 2 without the wire. The Bluetooth connection works well and the sound is as good as the Series 2.

Folding Yes **Quoted battery life** 17hrs **Wireless range** n/a**Bose QuietComfort 35 £290**

January 2017 ★★★★★

The latest QuietComforts benefit from being truly wireless and from a switch to rechargeable batteries. The best just got better.

Quoted battery life 20 hours (wireless), 40 hours (wired)**B&W PX £330**

Best wireless headphones £300+, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

The PXs are a fantastic package, boasting excellent sound quality, successful noise-cancelling and a smart design.

Folding Yes **Quoted battery life** 22hrs **Wireless range** n/aPRODUCT
OF THE YEAR**Sennheiser Momentum 2.0 Wireless £380**

January 2017 ★★★★★

Take the Momentum 2.0, add aptX Bluetooth and active noise cancellation and – *voilà*. You have these very desirable 'phones.**Folding** No **Quoted battery life** 22hrs **Wireless range** 10m**Sony WH-1000XM2 £330**

March 2018 ★★★★★

An upgrade on the 1000X, and with a more confident sound than that model, this is a superb all-round package. Great noise cancelling too.

Quoted battery life 30 hours (NC on), 38 hours (NC off)

£200 to £300

£300 and above

PORTABLE MUSIC PLAYERS

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whf.cm/BBPortableMusicPlayers**Cowon Plenue D £200**

Best portable music player under £250, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

The Plenue D is a player worth its salt. It can handle a range of files, has an open and insightful sound and is easy to use.

Hi-res compatible Yes **Weight** 94g **Storage** 32GBAWARD
WINNER

"Compared to the sound quality from even the best smartphones, there's more detail and nuance"

Up to £400

Cowon Plenue D £200

Best portable music player under £250, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

The Plenue D is a player worth its salt. It can handle a range of files, has an open and insightful sound and is easy to use.

Hi-res compatible Yes **Weight** 94g **Storage** 32GBPRODUCT
OF THE YEAR

"The sonic improvements over the Jr are more evolutionary than revolutionary"

£400 to £700

Astell & Kern Kann £900

Best portable music player £750+, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

The Kann is expensive but, despite the chunky aesthetics, the sound quality is impressive, with lashings of depth, detail and dynamism.

Hi-res compatible Yes **Weight** 279g **Storage** 832GBAWARD
WINNER

"When it comes to performance per pound, there's no mistaking the Kann's sonic chops"

£700 and above

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Over 5in

Apple iPhone 8 Plus

Best smartphone, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

It borrows several ideas from last year's 7 Plus, but a few small upgrades make a big difference and Apple's latest now leads the pack.

OS iOS Size (hwd) 159 x 78 x 8mm Storage 64GB



"Anyone upgrading from before the 7, or from the smaller design, will find a lot to love here"

HTC U11

August 2017 ★★★★★

HTC's latest is not the most innovative of efforts, but decent sound and terrific video mean it's up there with the best 2017 has to offer.

OS Android 7.1 Size (hwd) 154 x 76 x 8mm Storage 64GB/microSD



"There's something effortless in the way the U11 goes about its business – there are very few missteps"

Samsung Galaxy S9

Reviewed online ★★★★★

A polished successor to the S8 that, due to a number of carefully considered tweaks, is one of the best Android phones available.

OS Android Size (hwd) 148 x 69 x 9mm Storage 64GB/microSD



"Samsung's careful refinements make the S9 a pretty impressive package"

Samsung Galaxy S9+

May 2018 ★★★★★

It's more evolution rather than revolution, but that's enough to make the S9+ the best big Android phone you can currently buy.

OS Android Size (hwd) 160 x 74 x 9mm Storage 128GB/microSD



"The S9+ is as polished and refined as Android phones currently get"

STREAMING APPS & SERVICES

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On demand video

BBC iPlayer Free

Awards 2015 ★★★★★

Quality content, a great interface and free (for catch-up TV), BBC's iPlayer is one of, if not the best, video on-demand platforms out there.

Resolution up to 1080p Offline playback Yes



Google Play Movies & TV Variable

June 2014 ★★★★★

Google's venture into video streaming is a success, offering pretty much everything we could ask for from an on-demand video service.

Resolution Up to 1080p Offline playback Yes



On demand music

Qobuz Sublime £220/pa

May 2016 ★★★★★

Qobuz Sublime is, well, sublime. Easy to use, with a diverse catalogue and competitive prices, this is a service that packs in a lot of value.

Sound quality Up to 24-bit/192kHz Offline playback Yes



Technics Tracks Variable

January 2016 ★★★★★

Offering a (very) similar experience to 7digital, the Technics site focuses on hi-res music, which gives it the edge over its competition.

Resolution Up to 24-bit/192kHz Offline Playback Yes



Amazon Prime Instant Video £80 p/a

Best video streaming service, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

Cheaper than Netflix and with an extensive catalogue geared to new releases as well as 4K and HDR content, this is now a fantastic service.

Resolution Up to Ultra HD **Offline playback** Yes**Netflix £6 SD, £8 HD, £10 Ultra HD**

Awards 2016 ★★★★★

Without doubt one of the most satisfying streaming services, it runs on practically every platform available, even on your Ultra HD television.

Resolution Up to Ultra HD **Offline Playback** Yes**Now TV from £8/month**

June 2014 ★★★★★☆

Essentially a Sky service without the subscription, Now TV is a great way of getting the latest content without paying through the nose for it.

Resolution Up to 1080p **Offline playback** No**Apple Music from £10/month**

December 2016 ★★★★★

Apple's music service has intelligent curation, an extensive catalogue, very good sound quality and an engaging live radio station.

Sound quality Up to 256kbps AAC **Offline playback** Yes**Spotify from free**

December 2016 ★★★★★

Its accessibility, ease of use, huge catalogue and more mature music discovery are reasons why Spotify remains at the top of the pile.

Sound quality Up to 320kbps Ogg Vorbis **Offline playback** Yes

Video apps

Music apps

How to watch F1 on TV, 4K, online and mobileRead more at...
www.whathifi.com/advice**The second half of the 2018 F1 season has been dominated by Lewis Hamilton. With the Briton on the verge of winning his fifth drivers' championship, don't miss the climax to an exciting season****F1 on TV**

The Belgian GP began Channel 4's run to the end of the season, which will also mark the final season to be shown on terrestrial TV in the UK for several years. Their schedule also includes the Singapore, Japanese and US GPs, concluding with the Abu Dhabi season finale in November.

Steve Jones hosts alongside 13-times race winner David Coulthard, with Karun Chandhok as technical analyst and Lee McKenzie as pitlane reporter. Mark Webber, Susie Wolff and the inimitable Eddie Jordan are your special guests.

Sky has the rights to all the races through its dedicated F1 channel: Sky Sports F1. Ex-racer Martin Brundle and former world champion Damon Hill continue to host the show and are joined by Johnny Herbert, Paul di Resta and Anthony Davidson. Sky's F1 channel is the only place

to see the all the races live. Sky customers can get the channel on top of their existing subscription for £18/m.

F1 in Ultra HD 4K

If you want to watch F1 races in 4K, your options are limited to Sky. Sky's F1 channel broadcasts each practice, qualifying session and race in Ultra HD resolution, and the only way to get 4K is to purchase the Sky Q 2TB set-top box (the 1TB does not output in 4K). HDR support is coming in 2019, so for now you'll be watching in plain old 4K at 50fps.



Sky hasn't specified a date for Hybrid Log Gamma (HLG) integration, but we'd imagine it'll be ready for the start of the 2019 season.

F1 online and on mobile

Your online options are limited to Channel 4 and Sky. For its races, Channel 4 has live broadcast rights to practice sessions, qualifying and full races – all of which can be streamed on its All 4 catch-up and on demand platform. Get the free All 4 app and you can download the content on various mobile devices afterwards. Like BBC iPlayer, programmes stay on the service for 30 days.

Alternatively, there's Sky Go (free to Sky customers), which allows streaming across a range of compatible Android, iOS and Kindle Fire devices. For another £5 you can get Sky Go Extra, which allows downloads.

If you have no interest in a Sky contract, you can opt for Now TV. Available across a range of devices, purchasing Day (£7.99), Week (£12.99) or Month (£33.99) passes will allow viewers to dip in and out of Sky's sporting line-up at their leisure.

It's available on a number of platforms including Android, iOS, Xbox, PS4 and selected LG TVs.

Tidal from £10/month

Best music streaming service, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

One of the few streaming services to offer lossless audio, Tidal's exclusive content and curated playlists make it stand out. **Sound quality** Up to 1411kbps lossless **Offline playback** Yes

PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR



PORTABLE MUSIC PLAYERS

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Amazon Fire 7 (2017) £50

Best tablet under £200, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

A cheap and cheerful tablet that's good for the money and has a lot of the functionality you'd find in more expensive efforts.

OS Android **Size (hwd)** 114 x 190 x 10mm **Storage** 8GB

AWARD
WINNER



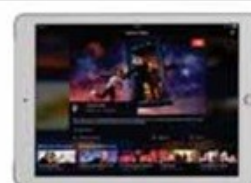
Apple iPad (2017) from £340

Best tablet over £200, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

The latest iPad receives a muted update, but it still continues to give you that elegant and intuitive experience we expect from Apple.

OS iOS **Size (hwd)** 240 x 170 x 8mm **Storage** 32/128GB

PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR



Apple iPad Pro 10.5in £1020

September 2017 ★★★★★

The 10.5in Pro cements Apple's position in the premium-tablet market, with faster performance, slicker design and fantastic image quality.

OS iOS **Size (hwd)** 250 x 174 x 6mm **Storage** 64/256/512GB



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Chord Company C-Line £35

Best analogue interconnect under £50, Awards 2017 ★★★★★
Few entry-level interconnects at the price come close to offering the sonic enjoyment that Chord has produced with this cable.
Balanced/Single Single

AWARD
WINNER



Up to £50

Chord Company C-Line £35

Best analogue interconnect under £50, Awards 2017 ★★★★★
Few entry-level interconnects at the price come close to offering the sonic enjoyment that Chord has produced with this cable.
Balanced/Single Single



Chord Clearway Analogue RCA £90

Best analogue interconnect £50+, Awards 2017 ★★★★★
If you're spending cash on hi-fi components and you want cabling that doesn't inhibit performance, the Clearway may be the ideal pick.
Balanced/Single Single

AWARD
WINNER



£50 and
above

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Atacama Apollo Storm 6 £390

February 2018 ★★★★★
Another class-leading support from Atacama that's cheaper than its Award-winning sibling. It lets your kit perform at its best.
Width 590mm **Modular** Yes **Cable management** No



"Want to give your system adequate support for a decent price? Atacama has you covered"

Up to £500

Atacama Elite Eco 12.0 £500

March 2013 ★★★★★
Those looking for a strong support for AV and hi-fi that enables a fluid, authoritative presentation will like the performance this rack can offer.
Width 1157mm **Modular** Yes **Cable management** Yes



"We were impressed by how our system performed when using this rack"

£500 and above

Atacama Evoque Eco 60-40 SE £600

Best equipment rack, Awards 2017 ★★★★★
The SE stands for Special Edition, while significant improvements in the Eco 60-40's design and dampening mean it works better than ever.
Width 600mm **Modular** Yes **Cable management** No

AWARD
WINNER



"If you're of the opinion all hi-fi racks are created more or less equal, think again"



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Headphone amplifiers

Schiit Audio Magni 3 £110

July 2018 ★★★★★

A headphone amp that's better than the name implies, this elegant device is a simple, affordable and great-sounding piece of kit.

Type MM **Dimensions (hwd)** 6 x 18 x 25cm



"This is a simple but effective, desktop friendly slice of hi-fi"

Pathos Aurium £850

August 2013 ★★★★★

A top-class choice for amplification, but you'll need a source and a pair of headphones of similar quality if you want the best from it.

Outputs 6.3mm, XRL, RCA **Inputs** XLR, 3 RCA



"The sound is a wonderfully seductive combination of transparency and grip"

Audio Technica AT-HA5050H £4500

July 2016 ★★★★★

A headphone amp with a design harking back to the 1970s, this unit has a spellbinding sound that will leave you captivated.

Outputs headphone x2 **Inputs** coaxial digital, XLR, RCA, USB



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Up to £200

Olson Sound Fantastic HF6 £135

September 2015 ★★★★★

Grants a system far greater freedom of expression without sacrificing control or authority. If you can afford to, buy it without reservations.

Type Block **Mains filter** Yes **No. of plugs** 6



Up to £200

Tacima CS947 £45

September 2015 ★★★★★

Great value, the highlight being how well it allows for greater detail, attack and dynamics. For the price, it's a brilliant entry-level purchase.

Type Block **Mains filter** Yes **No. of plugs** 6



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Paul Rigby, theaudiophileman.com, April 2017



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Audioquest JitterBug £40

April 2016 ★★★★★

It might look insubstantial, but when plugged into a USB port it works wonders, filtering signal noise to allow a more solid and precise sound.

Type USB Mains filter No No. of plugs n/a



Up to £200

Russ Andrews X6 £350

September 2015 ★★★★★

No matter what the source material, the X6 helps unearth a revealing well-integrated listen, allowing your kit to be as explicit as it can be.

Type Block Mains filter Yes No. of plugs 6



£200 and above

PHONO AMPLIFIERS

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Rega Fono Mini A2D £85

March 2012 ★★★★★

There's little fancy about the Fono Mini A2D, but that doesn't matter when the presentation is this good. And it has a useful USB output.

Type MM Dimensions (hwd) 6 x 18 x 25cm



Up to £200

Graham Slee Gram Amp 2 Communicator £180

July 2018 ★★★★★

A gem of a phono amplifier that has stood the test of time. It offers class-leading levels of detail, brilliant timing and a sweet sound.

Type MM Dimensions (hwd) 5 x 12 x 19cm



Musical Fidelity LX2-LPS £200

April 2018 ★★★★★

Though it's not as versatile as the Rega Mk3, the LX2 delivers a more engaging performance thanks to its open, full-bodied sound.

Type MM, MC Dimensions (hwd) 4 x 17 x 19cm



£200 to £350

Rega Fono MM MK3 £200

Best phono stage under £250, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

Rega has managed to take a near-perfect product and squeeze more improvements from it. It's a class-leading performer.

Type MM Dimensions (hwd) 5 x 18 x 14cm

AWARD
WINNER



Tacima™ CS947 Great value Mains Conditioner!

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CS947, Sept 2015



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Arcam rPhono £380

Best phono stage £250+, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

A hugely accomplished box from Arcam. It sounds great and has a combination of insight and entertainment that few rivals can match.

Type MM, MC Dimensions (hwd) 4 x 19 x 12cm

PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR**Musical Fidelity MX-VYNL £775**

May 2018 ★★★★★

A superbly made unit, that's nice to use and, most importantly, sounds lovely. As good a phono stage as we've heard at this price.

Type MM, MC Dimensions (hwd) 5 x 22 x 22cm



£1000 and above

Cyrus Phono Signature/PSX-R2 £1900

May 2016 ★★★★★

Partnered with the PSX-R2 power supply and a suitably talented turntable, the Signature sounds great. It's a top-class phono stage.

Type MM, MC Dimensions (hwd) 7 x 22 x 36cm

**Pathos In The Groove £1250**

February 2017 ★★★★★

Provided you have a suitably talented turntable, this is a fine and flexible phono stage that beautifully combines refinement with insight.

Type MM, MC Dimensions (hwd) 7 x 20 x 26cm

**Burmester 100 Phono £8840**

March 2018 ★★★★★

One of the finest phono stages available, the 100 is an understated but brilliant performer that has a fluid and dynamic presentation.

Type MM, MC Dimensions (hwd) 10 x 48 x 35cm



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QED XT25 £6/m

May 2018 ★★★★★

Features the same characteristics as the more expensive XT40, displaying the kind of transparency that's difficult for its rivals to match.

Single or Bi-wire Single



Chord Company C-Screen £5/m

June 2018 ★★★★★

The C-Screen possesses the fantastic ability to mirror a system's punch and drive. What it does, it does better than anything else at the price.

Single or Bi-wire Single



Wireworld Luna 7 £6.50/m

March 2014 ★★★★★

A fine speaker cable, the Luna's exciting presentation and all-round ability means it should sit well with a wide range of systems.

Single or Bi-wire Single



Chord Company Clearway £10/m

Best speaker cable, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

Not the flashiest cable, its strength is aiding dynamics and musicality, as well as knitting instruments together for an enjoyable experience.

Single or Bi-wire Single



QED XT40 £10/m

Awards 2014 ★★★★★

Facilitates a detailed, balanced and authoritative sound with a full-bodied presentation that leaves competitors sounding lean.

Single or Bi-wire Single



Up to £10/m

£10/m and above

SPEAKER STANDS

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Atacama Duo 6 £65

February 2013 ★★★★★

Easy to assemble (we suggest you mass-load the stand), these Atacamas help produce a detailed, clear and energetic sound.

Top plate size (wd) 130 x 170mm Height 60cm Fillable Yes



"Really good at letting your system do its job properly"

Atacama Moseco 6 £120

Best speaker stand, Awards 2017 ★★★★★

A speaker stand that impresses with how weighty and dynamic it allows systems to sound. Considering the price, it's something of a steal.

Top plate size (wd) 130 x 170mm Height 60cm Fillable Yes

AWARD WINNER



"The Mosecos may just be our new favourite affordable speaker stands"

Q Acoustics 20 speaker stands £200

September 2014 ★★★★★

Designed with QAs' Concept 20 speakers in mind, the clever construction and elegant design ensures other speakers give their best too.

Top plate size (hd) n/a Height 66.5cm Fillable No



"£200 for a pair of speaker stands? When they're this good, we don't mind"

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Six of the best albums of 2018 to test your speakers

Just some of the albums we've loved testing with this year

More than a collection of songs, the album is an arc, both musically and in terms of narrative, that elevates each track by virtue of those that surround it.

Relaying those stories is a stern test for your system, so here are six records that will tell you all you need to know about your speakers, and prove that the album still remains the pinnacle of musical expression in 2018.

NEW HYMN TO FREEDOM SZUN WAVES

For Szun Waves' improvised, unedited second album *New Hymn To Freedom*, the trio of saxophonist Jack Wyllie, electronic producer and experimental synth player Luke Abbott and drummer Laurence Pike craft a sonically dense and gloriously fluid psychedelic landscape.

Though a distinctive sound, it requires the same of your speakers as any great jazz recording: expert timing to navigate obscure rhythmic patterns, space for each instrument to articulate its lines and dynamic versatility to capture the unpredictability of its improvisation.

HERE LIES THE BODY AIDAN MOFFAT & RM HUBBERT

There are few voices in British music as distinctive as Aidan Moffat's, his lilting verse complemented by complex musical accompaniment, and that theme continues in this collaboration with Scottish guitarist RM Hubbert.

It's a record held together by a thread, a collage of percussive acoustic guitar lines and rhythms rather than driven by a traditional drum kit. It's a test in organisation as much as Moffat's vocal requires full body and sensitive dynamics to be brought fully to life.

KNOCK KNOCK DJ KOZE

German DJ and producer DJ Koze shuffles slightly away from the dancefloor on his latest album, marrying his trademark lo-fi melancholic house cuts with downtempo beats.

While Koze often turns to muffled kick drums and muttered vocals, there are also plenty of crowd-pleasing riffs and catchy basslines. Despite the laid back style, the production is meticulous with crunchy percussion and stirring dynamics sure to keep your system on its toes. Plenty of panning effects add an extra element for headphone listening, too.

SINGULARITY JON HOPKINS

Blurring lines between ambient techno and acid house, *Singularity* is a masterpiece of fractured beats and blissfully pulsing bass.

Seemingly minimal, yet with deeper listening revealing auxiliary synth strands without which the record would lose its sense of euphoria, it is a record deserving of a detailed pair of speakers also possessing the dynamic range to accentuate those leading notes that drive Hopkins's compound rhythms.



ALL MELODY NILS FRAHM

Nils Frahm has long investigated the granular detail of timbre, natural reverb and the recording of sound. Much of *All Melody* is bathed in the surroundings of his Funkhaus studio's reverb chamber, but his pursuit of ambient tone led him to set up a quasi-studio in a dry well in Mallorca.

Choral sections and pulsing bass notes are a test for your speakers' dynamic range and low-end control, but any lack of spaciousness will deny you

experience of the luscious natural reverbs Frahm has cultivated for this record.

COCOA SUGAR YOUNG FATHERS

Young Fathers softened some of the edges with this, their third studio album, but the result is no less arresting. *Cocoa Sugar* could perhaps be described as much as an experimental electronic record as a regular hip-hop album, driven by often off-kilter rhythms and a generous helping of low-end that your speakers will have to keep taut as well as delivering textural insight.



WHAT HI-FI?

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